

Kids or career? Lack of child care means tough choice for Labrador families ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Usually when someone finds out they're pregnant and expecting a new baby, they immediately share the exciting news with their closest friends and family. But, if you're an expectant parent in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, there's someone else - or, rather, somewhere else - you need to call as soon as possible.

"When I found out I was pregnant with my first child, many people approached me and said you're going to have to get your child on the list for child care because the shortage in Goose Bay is ridiculous," said Jessica Lawrence, an air traffic controller and mother-of-two living in Labrador.

On her friends' advice, Lawrence called local daycare Pumpkin House to have her yet-to-be-born son put on a waiting list for one of the toddler spaces.

The centre doesn't say how many people are waiting or predict timelines for when a space might open up, but Lawrence was certain two-and-a-half years would be sufficient notice.

That was early 2014, several months before her son, Parker, was due.

Parker turns three in August and the family finally received some news from the daycare earlier this week.

"I just got a call yesterday to find out that he is in this September, so that's a big relief for us," said Lawrence.

"But," she continued, "I have my 16-month-old daughter and no luck finding child care for her."

Shift-work, odd hours make search harder

The town isn't completely void of child-care options. Pumpkin House is one of three daycares, but the only one completely open to the general public.

The other two - located on the 5 Wing Goose Bay Canadian Forces Base and in the College of the North Atlantic campus, respectively - give priority to children of their own staff and students.

As an air traffic controller, Lawrence works a variety of day, evening, weekend and overnight shifts, while her husband is one of hundreds operating on a "two weeks on, one week off" schedule at the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric project.

They've relied on friends and family, but given the challenges of finding child care outside of the normal Monday to Friday grind, they're now facing a difficult choice.

"Worst-case scenario, we may have to switch," she said. "Adam may have to give up his current job to go back to find something Monday to Friday. But we're hoping it's not going to come down to that."

'The waitlists are substantial'

Lawrence's story is a familiar one for Holly Williams-Joy. As the program coordinator for the Mokami Status of Women Council in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, she said a variety of factors make child care inaccessible for many families.

"Obviously there's a lack of it within our community," she said.

"It's very costly for families. You almost have to budget it into an income to see if it's worthwhile to return to work and then to pay your child-care provider. The waitlists are substantial."

With parents having to weigh their limited child-care options against the reality of taking a job that may not cover the cost of a full-time sitter, many decide to delay their return to work, leaving gaps in the local workforce.

'It's very costly for families.'

"You always see signs of help wanted or looking for employment, but that's not necessarily the job that's going to pay the child-care provider or that the hours will work out that it's Monday to Friday, 8 to 4, which a lot of child care providers do," she said.

"So that definitely trickles out into our community and into our workforce in that way."

New daycare, same problems

Last month, Premier Dwight Ball announced \$441,000 for a new child-care centre to replace the aging Pumpkin House building.

The news initially offered a glimmer of hope to local families in desperate need of daycare, but a closer look at the numbers reveals the new centre will have space for 58 children - just three more than the current licence allows.

Williams-Joy was pleased to hear the government is investing in a modern facility, but remains skeptical as to whether it will alleviate the existing daycare crunch.

"The building that we do have available to us is definitely dated," she said. "But I don't know if it's going to alleviate any of the stress of families trying to find child care right now."

As for Jessica Lawrence, she's thankful for the support from friends and family who have stepped up to fill in the gaps while she and her husband juggle their young family and their jobs.

However, she's also frustrated that so many families are being forced to make the choice between having children or having a fulfilling career.

"It's sad, actually, because it's great being a mom, but it's also great being able to have the job that you've dreamed of and it's too bad that you're having to give that up."

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