

Province's child care affordability study to be led by U of T prof ^[1]

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Queen's Park has tapped University of Toronto economics professor Gordon Cleveland to lead a review of child care affordability in Ontario and suggest ways to make the service less costly for families.

And Toronto mother of two Shiralee Hudson Hill says Cleveland's recommendations "can't come fast enough."

"We keep hearing about data collection and reports and the findings just confirm what we already know: child care is unaffordable," said Hill, who pays more than \$32,000 in child care fees for her two daughters aged 1 and 4.

"Our household income isn't that low, but when you are paying the equivalent of two mortgages, it doesn't go very far," adds Hudson Hill, an exhibit planner for the AGO whose husband, Matt, is a labour relations specialist.

Ontario parents pay among the highest child-care fees in the country, with Toronto families shelling out the most at up to \$20,000 a year for a licensed spot, according to a national report on the issue last fall.

A respected researcher in the field, Cleveland co-authored a 1998 study with fellow U of T economics professor Michael Krashinsky that concluded every dollar the public invests in high-quality child care reaps \$2 in social and economic benefits.

In a report for the city of Toronto last fall, Cleveland found child care is unaffordable for three-quarters of city families.

Middle-income parents are most disadvantaged, because they earn too much to qualify for fee subsidies, but not enough to afford the staggering cost of licensed care, according to the study.

Cleveland's provincial review, to be complete by next February, is part of the province's five-year child care plan to double capacity for kids under age 4 by adding 100,000 licensed spots.

Just 20 per cent of Ontario children in that age group have access to licensed care now.

This spring's provincial budget earmarked \$200 million to fund 16,000 new child-care subsidies and 8,000 new spaces.

A further \$1.6 billion in capital funding was announced in June to help create another 45,000 new spaces in schools, public buildings and workplaces by 2022.

Cleveland will look at how other provinces tackle child-care fees, including fee caps and sliding scales, and assess what would work best in Ontario.

"We will look at a number of ways of improving affordability and (determine) which ones are the most cost-effective, which ones have the biggest impact on affordability, etc.," Cleveland said in an interview.

"With the dollars available, what's the best way to spend them to meet the province's objective, which is to dramatically improve child-care affordability across the province?" he added.

Child-care advocates welcomed the appointment.

"I'm delighted Gord Cleveland will be spearheading the Ontario government's commitment to make child care affordable," said Martha Friendly of the Child Care Resource and Research Unit.

"As parents struggle with fees higher than their mortgages, I am hoping this will lead to transformation from the current market-based funding, a relic of the past that is untenable for both parents and service providers," she added.

Indira Naidoo-Harris, minister responsible for early years and child care, said Cleveland's experience will be "invaluable."

"One of our top priorities is making child care more affordable for Ontario's families, to give all children the best possible start in life,"

Naidoo-Harris said in a statement. "I'm confident Dr. Cleveland will help us do that."

Ontario spends about \$1.37 billion a year to fund almost 390,000 licensed child care spots. Funding has increased by 60 per cent since 2010. The number of spaces has grown by 32 per cent in the past four years.

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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