

Operators, parents say funding for more flexible child care on P.E.I. 'crucial'

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EXCERPTS

Some operators and parents say they're relieved the provincial government is finally focusing on making child care more flexible on P.E.I.

The province announced earlier this week that as part of a new \$10.5 million funding agreement with Ottawa, it will spend \$1.5 million over the next three years to make child care more accessible to Islanders who work seasonally or outside regular business hours.

"It's crucial that we get this extra funding," said Anne Miller, the director of the Eastern Kings Early Learning Academy in Souris.

Miller says in the Souris area, particularly during fishing season, there are many parents who need child care outside her centre's operating hours of 6:45 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

"Some parents are leaving their homes at four in the morning," said Miller.

"We'd love to be open earlier. But we only have so much staff, and so many hours."

'Causing anxiety'

According to P.E.I.'s Early Childhood Development Association, there are no licensed centres on P.E.I. that open before 6:30 a.m., or operate after 6:30 p.m.

Jennifer MacKay said that's made trying to find child care for her seven-month-old son Evan impossible.

MacKay works 12-hour days on a rotating schedule as a registered nurse, while her husband does shift work as a security guard.

"I'm five months out [from returning to work], and it's causing anxiety already because I don't have a plan for when I go back to work," said MacKay.

"It's really frustrating because I know so many parents going through the exact same thing. I mean, everyone at the hospital works shift work...So, the fact there isn't child care for shift workers is beyond incomprehensible."

'Work together'

P.E.I.'s Director of Early Childhood Development Carolyn Simpson said her department has long recognized the challenges facing shift workers, as well as seasonal workers, who often struggle to find child-care spaces available to them for just a portion of the year.

Simpson said the federal funding agreement provides the means to finally do something about it.

"This funding will allow us to pull our sleeves up, work together with the sector, child care providers, and families to understand their needs to try and [address] this."

Simpson said a portion of the funding will be spent on hiring a project manager, who will work across the Island to identify the child care needs in each community, and what it will take to extend centres' hours and open up more spaces.

"That's one of the factors we have to consider: how will [the centres] set themselves up for shifts for staff, and how many new staff are required?" said Simpson. "Can we modify with your existing staff, and if not, what can we do to support recruitment of new staff?"

'This is big'

Ultimately, Simpson expects much of the \$1.5 million will need to be spent on subsidizing the cost for centres to extend their hours.

Without subsidies, the Early Childhood Development Association says it's not feasible for most centres to offer more flexible hours.

"It becomes financially challenging for the centre to offer that extended hour for families because they might only have one or two children

coming in for that period of time," said Sonya Hooper, the association's executive director.

Anne Miller said she still needs to crunch numbers to see how much financial support she'll need to accommodate more parents' schedules.

"There's the cost of food, the cost of electricity to be open longer hours, there's the space issue. And then there's all the licensing regulations we have to adhere to," said Miller.

"This is big and right now people are dreaming of things that maybe could happen in their area, as am I. But at the end of the day, this may not be as feasible as people think."

Simpson said she's confident that by next summer, some centres will start offering more flexible hours.

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