

Critical child-care action plan on horizon for Manitoba ^[1]

Author: Pursaga, Joyanne

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A five-year provincial action plan on child care could arrive in a month, as nearly 17,000 Manitoba kids wait for a daycare spot.

Families Minister Scott Fielding said negotiations to claim roughly \$15 million of federal child-care cash in each of the next three years are well underway. He expects to announce an agreement soon, followed by Manitoba's master child-care plan.

"We anticipate over the next coming weeks or a month that we'll be able to finalize our agreement with the federal government and at that point we'll be releasing our overall five-year plan," said Fielding.

As of Aug. 31, 16,702 children were waiting for child-care spots on the province's online central waiting list, which Fielding acknowledged will take time to address.

"The money that the feds are going to provide is an important step in the right direction but it by all means is not going to address every single space issue in the province," he said.

Fielding announced the timeline during an interview about the province's latest child-care investment on Friday. That \$245,000 increase to operating grants for licensed, home-based child-care providers adds to last year's grants of \$3.4 million.

"We know under the previous administration, there was about a 29% drop in the amount of home-based providers that were there," said Fielding. "We want a balanced approach to child-care, not just a facility or just a home-based one."

Fielding said the new grant money is aimed at preventing further home daycare losses.

The executive director of the Manitoba Child Care Association calls the grant "a step in the right direction" and agrees much more action is needed. Pat Wege said wait times for a child-care spot often last 14 to 15 months, which leads some parents to quit jobs, extend leaves or delay their education.

"We're up well over 2,000 spaces in the last nine months," Wege said.

Wege said the delivery of the province's action plan is critical to finally making a significant dent in the waiting list.

"In the absence of a provincial strategy, nothing much is really happening right now in terms of new spaces," Wege said. "Centres considering expanding are putting plans on hold because they don't know if the money will be there. Meanwhile, families are waiting without spots."

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