

Free daycare for low-income families announced ^[1]

Registry for daycare spaces, higher pay for early childhood education workers also announced

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EXCERPTS

Premier Brian Gallant announced changes to New Brunswick's daycare system Thursday afternoon, including plans to provide free care for certain low-income families, create a wait list for childcare spaces, and increase wages for people working in daycare centres.

Families with an annual income under \$37,500 will now have access to free daycare, Gallant said, to give them "every opportunity to enter the workforce."

However, the program applies only to children aged five and under attending a designated "early learning centre," a new designation the province announced earlier this week that would require daycare centres to upgrade their facilities.

Those are only now being accredited by the province from existing daycare centres and the process is expected to take several months.

According to Thursday's announcement, the first designated centres for eligible families will be in Saint John and the Edmundston areas by March 2018. The government plans to make the free early learning program available provincewide by March 1, 2019, Gallant said.

New Brunswick now spends \$15 million a year subsidizing the cost of daycare for lower-income parents in order to help them enter the workforce.

The provincial Liberals have long called that amount inadequate and promised to double assistance after the 2014 provincial election — a pledge that has been put off twice in the last three years.

Earlier this week, the Gallant government announced a voluntary program that will allow existing daycares to upgrade themselves, with funding assistance from the province, to what the government is calling "early learning centres."

The government is aiming to have half of the province's daycares meet this designation by 2020.

The funding assistance will consist of \$4.7 million in one-time grants that will be available over the next two years for centres to make upgrades. In addition, the province is pledging to spend \$7.5 million per year for grants that will be available annually to assist centres in meeting the criteria to become an early learning centre.

Formal waiting list

At Thursday's announcement, Gallant also said the province will create a childcare registry by late 2018 to allow parents to find out if there is a daycare space for their child in their community, and if not, to be put on a wait list.

The province also plans to spend \$28 million to support wage increases for people employed in early childhood education, he said. The government is aiming to raise wages to \$19 an hour from \$16 an hour for trained early childhood educators by 2022-/2023.

Daycare operators have also told CBC News that Education Department officials have been holding meetings across the provinces to discuss shifting to a government-directed and partially funded system, similar to those in Prince Edward Island, Quebec and Manitoba.

Daycares in the province are a collection of for-profit and non-profit businesses with some government regulation and oversight.

Mixed response from parents

Some young parents welcomed the news enthusiastically while others had questions about whether it will help or not.

Hayley Leveque of Saint John has three children in daycare and gets maximum government assistance under existing funding but that still requires her to pay \$32 per day out of pocket. She will now qualify for free care and is thrilled.

"If we get free childcare I would be really grateful," she said in response to the announcement.

But the benefit is less clear for Amanda Stackhouse and her partner, William MacDonald, who also have three children under the age of 5.

They cannot afford any daycare under current rules, and so MacDonald quit his job to be a stay-at-home parent.

Stackhouse said the family might benefit from Thursday's announcement, depending on how government calculates household income.

"It depends if (federal) family allowance is counted," said Stackhouse.

Little detailed information like that was included in the announcement.

Also unknown is whether current assistance to parents who earn between \$37,500 and \$55,000 is also being improved or whether all the improvements are for families with incomes below that.

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