

Most families can't access 'flagship' on-reserve childhood development program: Indigenous Services department ^[1]

Problems with Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve program identified in 2016

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EXCERPTS

A federal program designed for early childhood development on First Nations is still facing serious shortfalls and failing to serve the majority of children living on reserve, according to information tabled in the House of Commons.

The Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve program is only serving between 18 to 19 per cent of eligible First Nations children across the country and its services are unavailable to First Nations children with special needs, according to information provided by the Indigenous Services department.

The program is designed to provide support for families living on reserve and to help young children prepare for school.

"The flagship program the government always talks about helping young moms and babies on-reserve is completely underfunded and broken," said NDP MP Charlie Angus, who obtained the information through an Order Paper question.

"Young babies with special needs can't get access and many of the locations where they are providing these services are substandard."

MPs can ask written questions to government ministries through the House of Commons Order Paper. The government then has 45 days to respond.

Long wait lists, lack of infrastructure

The federal Indigenous Services department said that the program is facing long wait lists, partly as a result of population growth and stagnant funding "which may erode service delivery and quality over time."

The department said a lack of trained staff, proper equipment and accessibility often prevents young children with special needs and their families from receiving the program's services.

The department also said buildings housing the program face serious infrastructure problems that often limit the number of children and families that can access its services.

Angus said early childhood development is a key component to ending the child welfare crisis in First Nation communities.

"It is part of the larger perverse funding mechanism the government has," said Angus.

"They continually and chronically underfund these programs and then they seem surprised these kids grow up without an opportunity for education, and then are taken into the child welfare system."

More funding, expanded services

Indigenous Services Minister Jane Philpott's office issued a statement saying it invested \$38 million last year for repairs and renovations at Head Start facilities.

"Our government is committed to ensuring that Indigenous children receive the services they need, when and where they need them," said the statement.

The Order Paper response also said that in the 2016-2017 fiscal year, the federal government allocated \$12.8 million for urgent repairs and renovations for 70 facilities that house on-reserve Head Start programs across the country.

The government has also created a new Indigenous Early Learning Child Care Framework that would receive at least \$130 million annually over the next 10 years under the federal government's \$7-billion investment in early learning and child care.

The department has also recently completed talks with "Indigenous partners" to increase "Indigenous control and influence over governance, programming and delivery" of early childhood learning services. The department is now discussing increased funding, service enhancement and expansion, according to the Order Paper response.

The Star Blanket Cree Nation in Saskatchewan opened a new Head Start building last month. Ottawa provided \$700,000 for the new building to house the Coweniska Head Start Learning Centre.

Questions over suicide prevention figures

Angus said he was also shocked by the numbers released by the department that seemed to show that funding for First Nations children and youth suicide prevention in Ontario seemed to be less than what was spent on the program at Indigenous Service's headquarters in the Ottawa capital region.

"In my own region we have lost eight young people since Christmas," said Angus. "How can we trust this government when they spend more maintaining their offices in Ottawa?"

According to the figures provided by the department, \$13.3 million was spent on suicide prevention in Ontario between the 2008-2009 fiscal year and the 2016-2017 fiscal year, while \$13.9 million went to headquarters over the same time span.

Philpott's office said the difference is due to accounting practices which lump the department's Inuit suicide prevention strategy in its headquarter numbers, along with other agreements dealing with the issue.

Suicide prevention programs are also funded through mental health programming which wouldn't show up in the suicide prevention column of the chart released by the department, said a spokesperson for Philpott's office.

Not a new problem

Funding and access problems with the Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve program have been known for some time. A Health Canada memo from January 2016 stated that the program failed to provide a level of assistance "comparable to that which is available to the general population."

The memo stated that at the time, only 17 per cent of First Nations children living on-reserve benefited from the program.

The memo was drafted after the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled that Ottawa discriminated against First Nations children by underfunding child welfare services.

First Nations and Inuit health services once provided by Health Canada are now delivered by Indigenous Services.

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