

Waiting lists persist at Japan's municipal day care facilities ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A 32-year-old woman recently received a letter of rejection from Meguro Ward in Tokyo saying her 3-month-old son had failed to land a slot in any of the 10 municipally funded day care facilities she had applied for.

"I didn't think it would be this difficult to get my child in day care," she said.

Meguro Ward is considered one of the toughest places to get a day care slot, with some parents saying it's more difficult than entering the prestigious University of Tokyo. But the woman, who asked not to be named, didn't realize that until she started looking for a nursery.

She also looked for facilities not funded by municipalities. But one of them had 100 children on its waiting list, while another would cost ¥150,000 a month — too expensive for her salary.

"I was beyond despair," the woman said, adding that, if push comes to shove, she is determined to job hop to a company where there is day care at the office.

According to a Kyodo News survey released last week that drew responses from 66 municipalities across Japan, a total of about 35,000 children up to age 2 were rejected in the initial screening process for day care facilities.

Ninety percent of the municipalities said they had to turn down applicants due to a lack of slots in day care facilities.

The survey was conducted on 23 wards in Tokyo in addition to major cities and 87 smaller cities that had 100 children or more on municipal day care waiting lists as of last April 1.

According to the survey, there were 174,974 applicants, of which 140,028 were accepted, or 100 slots for every 125 applicants.

Those who were rejected either need to wait for a slot to become vacant or find other day care facilities not funded by municipalities, which are usually more costly.

Last year, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced plans for the government to shoulder fees for kindergarten and day care for children between the ages of 3 and 5, prompting more people to apply. An increase in a number of double-income households is also making the competition tough.

Some municipal leaders are taking the matter into their own hands.

Hirofumi Yoshimura, mayor of Osaka, where the number of children waiting to get into city-funded day care facilities stood at 325 last year, set aside about ¥8.5 billion in its fiscal 2018 budget to ensure there are an additional 4,054 slots, including at city-funded facilities.

In addition, the city of Osaka earmarked about ¥70 billion to run day care and other child care facilities.

"The mayor told us to earmark the necessary budget allocation and not leave the issue of children on waiting lists as is. The amount is unheard of in any other municipality," an Osaka official said.

Akashi, Hyogo Prefecture, started shouldering the entire day care fees for all children after each family's first child — a policy pushed by its mayor, Fusaho Izumi.

Due to this policy, coupled with the construction of a number of apartment complexes in the city, many households with small children started moving in, making it harder to get a slot. The number of children on day care waiting lists doubled in a year.

To tackle the issue, Akashi plans to expand the number of day care slots by 2,000 in fiscal 2018.

In the Kyodo News survey, many municipalities expanded the number of slots at day care facilities, which led to an improvement in the overall situation.

But it also found that parents of about 35,000 children rejected by day care facilities are still trying to find a place to send their children

while they work.

“Expansion of slots is an improvement,” said Tae Amano, head of a parents group.

But Amano warns that parents may turn a blind eye if they feel day care officials aren’t providing good-quality care for their children.

“They need to increase the number of day care facilities so users will be able to choose.”

-reprinted from The Japan Times

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