

NDP vows to 'do better' on child care than free preschool care ^[1]

Details will be unveiled in party platform, NDP Leader Andrea Horwath tells YMCA child-care gathering.

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EXCERPTS

Ontario's NDP would "do better" than the Liberal government's plan to offer free child care for preschoolers starting in 2020, Andrea Horwath says.

"I think we can actually do better," the NDP leader told a gathering Monday of more than 2,000 child-care workers employed by the YMCA of Greater Toronto, the province's largest child-care operator.

"We simply must make child care affordable for every family in Ontario. Not just for the parents of children of certain ages, but for the parents of every age," Horwath said.

Infant and toddler care is the most expensive and must be addressed for women to have a "real choice" to return to work after having a baby, she said, adding details will be released in the NDP platform.

If she wins the June 7 provincial election, Horwath said she would also ensure all public child-care funding supports public and not-for-profit child-care operators, such as the YMCA, and does not "pad the profits of private companies."

An NDP government would support "fair wages" in the child-care sector along with pharmacare for all Ontarians and dental care for everyone without a workplace plan, she added.

Horwath made the pledge at Mississauga's International Centre where YMCA staff marked the organization's 50th anniversary of providing child care in the GTA. Its 293 centres, serving almost 20,000 children from birth to age 12, were closed Easter Monday.

Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne and Education Minister Indira Naidoo-Harris also addressed the gathering. Progressive Conservative Leader Doug Ford was invited, but declined, organizers said.

Wynne said her government's proposed \$2.2-billion investment in free preschool child care, unveiled last week, is the "next step" in a 2016 plan to double the number of licensed spots for children under age 4 within five years.

Last year, the government allocated \$1.6 billion to build 45,000 of the projected 100,000 new licensed spaces. An additional \$530 million was announced in last week's budget to be spent over six years to create another 14,000 preschool spaces — most of them in schools.

In addition to free preschool care, the Liberal plan also envisions more fee subsidies to ensure care for younger and older children is affordable for low- to modest-income families.

"We are making this investment to change the game for so many families," Wynne said.

But the loudest applause came when Wynne outlined the Liberals' plan to bring in a provincial wage grid for child-care workers in April 2020 to "increase fairness in the sector."

"You are professionals charged with the care of that most precious cargo," she said. "And you deserve to be treated and compensated as such."

Under the Liberal plan, wages for ECEs in child care would rise to match those in classrooms, where wages range from about \$24 an hour to almost \$30 an hour.

"Now, more than ever, we need a government that invests in care, not cuts," Wynne said, alluding to PC Leader Ford's promise to cut taxes and government spending, if elected.

Ford has so far refused to say what his party would do about the Liberals' child-care plan if his party wins the election.

A recent government survey of licensed child-care centres found more than 60 per cent of full-time registered early childhood educators earn less than \$20 an hour.

ECEs working for the YMCA already have a pay grid with salaries starting at \$20.62 per hour, or \$40,209 annually. Supervisors earn up to

\$37 an hour. Child-care workers without college diplomas earn between \$16.65 and \$21.70 an hour. All staff receive health and dental benefits.

Sham Dhanji, 35, an ECE with the YMCA for 14 years, says she is pleased child care is becoming an election issue.

“When politicians talk about child care, it opens the eyes of the community that child care is important,” she said in an interview. “The more families learn about child care, the better it is for us ... we’ll be able to open more quality centres for the kids. And in the end, it’s all about the kids.”

YMCA president Medhat Mahdy said his organization will be pressing all three political parties to support child care in the spring election, adding the Y has the capacity to serve 10,000 more children in licensed care if fees were more affordable and more trained staff were available.

“There is a need for more space, a need for more funding to subsidize parents and there is a shortage of qualified ECEs,” he said in an interview. “These are the systemic challenges we would like to (address in partnership) with whichever party forms the government.”

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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