

Affordable child care on the horizon for Alberta parents - but who will get in? ^[1]

The NDP government says the expanded \$25-a-day child care will be open to all families, regardless of income

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EXCERPTS

The emails started arriving almost immediately after the government announced on Wednesday that 19 of the YMCA's facilities had been chosen to offer \$25-a-day child care.

The messages snowballed, and by the next day more than 300 emails were in the YMCA's inbox for the daycare program.

"One parent said it felt like they'd won the lottery," said Nick Parkinson, president and CEO for the YMCA, Northern Alberta.

For some parents, that's a pretty good analogy.

A family with a one-year-old child that currently pays \$1,325 every month for daycare at the downtown YMCA will now have fees of \$544 per month.

For low-income parents who currently qualify for the maximum public subsidy of about \$550 per month, child-care fees will drop to zero.

"It's all worth it when you have parents who appreciate it and have money in their pockets to feed their child something better than comes from a bag of chips," said Jasvinder Heran, executive director of the Intercultural Child and Family Centre.

The Intercultural Child and Family Centre is located in the heart of the McCauley neighbourhood, where many parents struggle with poverty.

But not all daycares selected for the program serve the same demographic. Programs such as the child-care centre at the University of Alberta, which mainly serves the university community and has a huge waiting list, is also set to offer \$25-a-day child care.

Most money for this round of affordable child-care funding is coming from the federal government. It is intended to add more than 6,000 affordable spaces in the province, on top of 1,000 such spots created through an NDP pilot project last year.

It will be a huge shift for parents whose children attend the daycares. But, as the hundreds of emails to the YMCA attest, the program will also create long lists of parents trying to get in. And the NDP's political opponents say they want to support families, but this isn't the way to do it.

Who gets in?

One of the main questions about \$25-a-day child care is this: Who gets it?

The answer, in theory, is anyone.

There is no means test for parents to receive \$25-a-day child care at any of the 120 not-for-profit centres that have been selected to be part of the program.

"It is an example of looking at what universal access to affordable child care would look like," said Minister of Children's Services Danielle Larivee, speaking on Alberta at Noon on Friday.

Larivee said it's not just those parents who struggle to pay bills who will benefit from \$25-a-day care. Teachers who have a second child might not be able to afford go back to work, or a nurse might end up "almost paying to go to work" with high child-care costs, she said.

Many daycares already have waiting lists, with some telling parents it could take 18 months to two years for their children to be accepted.

Parkinson, from the YMCA, said parents who are already on waiting lists will not lose their spots. And children who are already in their participating programs will have their fees reduced in June.

Parkinson noted that several YMCA centres are operating under capacity, especially in low-income neighbourhoods. Those spots — almost 200 — are expected to be quickly snapped up with the new funding.

The funding will allow the Edmonton Garrison Military Family Resource Centre Daycare to expand by 15 spaces. Priority is given to currently serving military members, followed by reservists, then other parents.

"Once the announcement was made, we received quite a few phone calls," said Angela Duckworth, senior communications co-ordinator for the family resource centre.

Those at the childcare centre right now will have their fees reduced in June, while new spots will start opening up to their waiting list, which is already 100 children long.

The cost question

The Intercultural Child and Family Resource Centre received funding for \$25-a-day child care in the NDP's first announcement in 2017.

Heran, who heads the centre, said it's not just families living in poverty that have benefited.

"Even with money, life has stressors," she said. "(This way), you're on the same page, you're not above or below anybody. Everyone is getting the same treatment as best as we can, and people network with each other. You learn from each other."

"Those parents solidify relationships at open houses, family meetings, pick up and drop off. They know what other families are going through. Parents can connect with someone who is in a position that has authority or clout. They do network."

At the YMCA, Parkinson said children often come from a mix of socio-economic demographics.

"We are open and accessible to all, regardless of economic circumstance," said Parkinson. "The gap between haves and have-nots is growing in Alberta today, income disparity is a concern. The more we can bring people together, I think, helps narrow those gaps."

But the NDP's political opponents have criticized the government's approach.

"The families in the most need should be the ones that have the most access to it," said Alberta Liberal Leader David Khan.

He said Quebec has recently introduced some means testing to its much-lauded \$7-a-day child-care program, because so many upper and middle class parents had figured out how to navigate wait lists.

"We think it should be rolled out in a more equitable fashion, so those families most in needs can access it first. Because there's a limited amount of funding, they should be tied to your income in some way."

The United Conservative Party said it is concerned about the long-term viability of the program, considering Alberta's finances.

"We want to support families, but we think it's better to keep dollars in the pockets of families rather than taking dollars away from families through tax increases," the party said in a statement.

Families looking out

The YMCA has 19 centres that will offer \$25-a-day child care, with the majority in Edmonton. Its wait list will, as always, prioritize children with siblings who are already in the YMCA system.

Peterson said the word is definitely "trickling out," and the reactions have sometimes been surprising.

"I heard that one parent that has money and said, 'This is great, but I'm going to increase my Strong Kids program donation to the YMCA,'" Parkinson said.

"They'll save \$500 per month on child care, and they want to give back. Hopefully more people will do that."

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