

Alberta child-care survey points to success of \$25-a-day programs ^[1]

Public Interest Alberta survey says program more likely to serve infants, children with disabilities

Author: Omstead, Jordan

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EXCERPTS

An Edmonton-based organization is calling on the province to expand its \$25-a-day child-care pilot programs after a survey found it outperformed other child-care operators in a number of areas.

Public Interest Alberta released the results of its 2018 Alberta child care survey on Wednesday.

The survey found the pilot programs were 15 per cent more likely to serve infants and 12 per cent more likely to offer services to children with disabilities, compared to other child-care operators in the province. The programs were also more likely to have highly-qualified staff and professional development opportunities.

"This program is valuable," said executive director Joel French. "We don't want there to be barriers to care."

The government launched the pilot program in 2016, with 22 Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) centres offering \$25-a-day care in the province to young children. The program added another 100 centres in April.

'There was really nothing I could afford'

Billie MacFarlane didn't realize how expensive child care was in Edmonton until she had triplets two years ago.

She said the cost of putting her four kids — her eldest daughter is now five years old — in daycare would have been roughly \$4,000 a month, more than she earns as an executive assistant.

"It didn't really hit me until I needed it," she said. "There was really nothing I could afford."

But this past September, MacFarlane secured a spot for all four kids at Jasper Place Child and Family Resource Society in Edmonton, one of 35 ELCC centres in Edmonton.

She was able to return to work and collect her health benefits, while cutting her child-care costs in half compared to other programs.

"I feel much better about myself, contributing to the economy, and working for an organization and helping the community," she said. "I need that time, and I think it makes me a better mother. When they [my kids] see me, they greet me like I'm a rockstar."

More waitlists for 'quality care'

But as families compete for spots in a pilot program centre, lengthy wait lists are common. According to the survey, nine in every ten ELCC centres have a wait list — 30 per cent more than other child-care operators.

The wait list at Jasper Place is now at 250 children, according to executive director Adine Shuchuk. But she said it's a reflection of the conditions the centre is able to foster under the pilot program.

She noted that the program has given the centre the means to pay staff to develop and review lesson plans — or "non-care" hours — a rarity in child-care spaces. The survey found almost half of the province's child-care operators did not have funding for non-care hours.

A wage floor increase, introduced under the program, has boosted the average salary of the child-care workers at the centre from \$14.81 to \$19.00, according to Shuchuk. The pay hike has attract qualified staff with at least two years of child-care education.

MacFarlane said it was important to her that the people raising her children are also fairly compensated.

"It's not fair to ask somebody to take care of your child and raise quality children and not give them the amount of money they deserve," she said.

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Region: Alberta ^[3]

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