

\$25-a-day child care in high demand in Red Deer ^[1]

Red Deer Child Care Society hopes program will expand

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EXCERPTS

A program that slashed daycare costs for at least 70 children in Red Deer has parents eagerly waiting for access.

Last year, the province expanded its \$25-a-day child-care program to 122 centres across Alberta. Parents are expected to save an average of \$425 a month with the Early Learning and Child Care Centres program.

Access to \$25-a-day child care is not dependent on having a lower income.

It is available to any family if they can find space in the popular program, although a separate subsidy continues to be available to low-income families.

Pines Day Care, with the Red Deer Child Care Society, became part of the Early Learning and Child Care Centres pilot in May 2018, and about 80 to 100 kids are on the waiting list, said society co-executive director Jennifer Winter.

"It is great for the families that have been able to access it. Once a family gets in, they're not leaving, so we have a lot of people on the wait list that are frustrated with not being able to get in," Winter said.

"It's a good program. It's just too bad it can't help more families."

She said some families using Pines Day Care are fully subsidized and pay only a few dollars a month. If they don't qualify for any subsidy, they still only pay \$550.

Usually, fees range from \$900 to \$1,700 a month for child care.

Parent Meaghan Zelowsky said it's great to be able to access the program with the current economy.

"It made a big difference financially. We had more freedom to pay our bills. It wasn't tight every month to make it work," said Zelowsky, who has two children at Pines Day Care.

"We won't be moving."

She started using the day care last March before it became a \$25-a-day centre. Her oldest daughter will start kindergarten in September, but she will continue to attend the day care when kindergarten isn't in session.

Zelowsky said some moms on maternity leave are sharing a spot so it will be available when they need it in the future.

"It's very sought after. A few of my friends are on the wait list and they're trying to get in," Zelowsky said.

Winter said the program doubled enrolment at Pines Day Care and the society would like to see it expanded.

"If a different party gets in, how will they approach it? Are they going to continue it just with changes? It's really hard to say," Winter said in reference to the upcoming provincial election.

Public Interest Alberta's 2018 Alberta Child Care Survey results showed Early Learning and Child Care Centres were doing better at providing higher quality care with better-trained and quality staff.

They are also providing more care spaces for infants and children with disabilities, it said.

"In particular, with these pilot centres, we're showing what quality care can do. I think we really need to expand that to more child care centres. These 122 centres are covering still a very small part of the child-care sector of the province," said Joel French, executive director of Public Interest Alberta, a non-profit organization focused on education and advocacy.

He said the NDP has been talking about moving toward a comprehensive, universal system of child care, and the centres show what it would look like if it was available to all Albertans.

The federal government contributed \$136 million over three years to the program, and the province has put in \$14.5 million.

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