

26,000-signature petition demands increased for Manitoba's child-care centres ^[1]

Centres struggle financially, while parents struggle to find spaces: Manitoba Child Care Association

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EXCERPTS

A box brimming with petitions signed by 26,000 people landed with a metaphorical thud at the Manitoba Legislature on Tuesday, tied to a demand for the provincial government to do more to support child care.

In what it says is the most signatures a government petition has received in recent memory, the Manitoba Child Care Association called on the province to end its funding freeze for child-care centres.

"To collect 26,000 signatures in a mere four weeks shows the overwhelming support from both the child-care community and Manitobans alike," said Jodie Kehl, the association's executive director.

The association has numerous concerns, but they all stem from a lack of money — which Kehl said is jeopardizing the viability of her sector and does not address the growing demand for child-care spaces or the shortage of workers.

"As a parent, I get it," said NDP Leader Wab Kinew, who met media on Tuesday armed with a box of signatures.

He said it was a struggle to find child care for his two older sons, and he now has a baby at home who he'll also need to find care for.

Daycare forced to fundraise

Kathy Gardiner understands the worries of young parents throughout the province.

She is the executive director of the Learning and Growing Daycare in Charleswood, which has turned to fundraising to cover expenses. Last year, her staff, board and parents raised \$26,000 through a mixture of barbecues, pancake breakfasts and charitable donations from parents who already pay at least \$20 a day for their children's care.

"We just have to be creative," she said.

Despite their efforts, Gardiner expects the centre to be in the red around \$13,000 once its 2018-19 numbers are crunched.

It must find alternative revenue since its annual operating grant of roughly \$300,000 has been stagnant since 2016, and the fees parents pay have been capped since 2013.

"We have to fundraise," she said. "We have no other source of income."

With limited means, staff salaries are also staying flat, Gardiner said.

"There's just no incentive for people to come into this field."

We want to make sure that it's affordable for Manitoba families and there's obviously a balance there that we need to strike.- Families Minister Heather Stefanson

Kehl would rather that shortfall was covered by money from government coffers than from the pocketbooks of parents.

"Although we certainly don't want to make a hardship on families, what we know is that our centres are really struggling now," Kehl said.

"So one way or the other, we're asking for an operating increase to their programs."

The province has 16,000 children on the waiting list for a child-care spot at last check, she said.

1,600 child-care spaces

Families Minister Heather Stefanson acknowledged there's work to do to improve the child-care system in Manitoba, but she was non-committal on whether an increase in funding from the Progressive Conservative government is coming.

"We've inherited a significant challenge from the previous NDP government when it comes to finances," she said, noting the government plans to establish 1,600 more child-care spaces this year.

Stefanson has struck a working advisory group where members of the child-care industry, alongside parents, will offer advice on how to improve the province's subsidized offerings. The subject of parent fees will come up, she said.

"We need to really talk about that," Stefanson said. "We want to make sure that it's affordable for Manitoba families and there's obviously a balance there that we need to strike."

She said the government removed the waiting list numbers from its website because it considers the 16,000 estimate inaccurate — since that includes 1,000 spaces needed for children who have not yet been born.

The province expects to republish the list once these issues are sorted out.

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