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B.C.'s child care shortage a problem for more than just parents [1]

In B.C., child care is nearly impossible to find and expensive to boot. Vancouver alone is short 16,274 spaces. Help is coming, albeit slowly
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EXCERPTS

Kartiki Deshpande and her family love Vancouver, so there's only one reason they are considering leaving.

Their daughter Nova is on waiting lists for daycares around Vancouver, at a cost of about $1,000 in non-refundable deposits and application fees.

They have waited for about 2½ years, Deshpande said. "Two or three days after I delivered, I had my husband do all the paperwork. … On our to-do list, it was the top item."

Nova, who is currently cared for by a nanny, is among the more than 80 per cent of Vancouver children in some form of unlicensed care. Deshpande's family hasn't been able to find anything appropriate for when their current arrangement ends in July.

The situation has placed immense stress on Deshpande and her husband, prompting difficult conversations about leaving the city they love and departing to outer suburbs — where the situation isn't much better — or leaving B.C. altogether.

"This is how it is, and it doesn't stop here. … My more experienced friends and acquaintances are warning me to make a decision on moving pretty soon, because they're advising me to put my daughter's name on wait lists for after-school care — that is, after she's six," Deshpande said. "They say if I don't do it right now, I'll face the same problem later.

"What chance do we have?"

Deshpande's story illustrates why the shortage of licensed child care spaces in Vancouver — and B.C. — is a problem for more than just the parents: They don't want to leave the city nor does the city want to lose them.

Deshpande and her husband both have masters degrees. She works in the green building sector. He's a data scientist. City of Vancouver staff speak candidly about how the child care crisis is squeezing out many people the city needs.

Mary Clare Zak has seen colleagues leave town for the same reason. One of her colleagues has to drive every morning from her home in Vancouver to Burnaby, the closest city she could find a daycare space. Considering that Zak is Vancouver's director of social policy — and child care is in her portfolio — she feels "terrible," she said, that this is the reality.

As all but the very luckiest parents can avow, the shortage of licensed child care in Metro Vancouver is not new. When Zak had her first child in the 1990s, the daycare shortage was bad. Now, she said, "It's only gotten worse."

'An invisible crisis'

The daycare shortage, says one of B.C.'s most prominent child care advocates, has long been invisible.

"It's often invisible until you're new parents who need to go back to work and suddenly realize the crisis is actually as bad as people told you it was," said Sharon Gregson, the longtime advocate. "Until you come face-to-face with it, it often is a bit of an invisible crisis."

Advocates say one reason the situation has been allowed to persist is because child care is disproportionately borne by women.

Desphande says she's seen the lack of child care in Vancouver drive out friends and colleagues. And if a failure of public policy is driving skilled, motivated people in their 20s, 30s and 40s out of the region, that's a societal problem.

Zak and her colleagues at city hall have tried in recent years to step up efforts in an area that has traditionally been a provincial responsibility. In an expensive city with a constrained land supply, that means thinking outside the box: Vancouver has been putting daycare centres on top of underused downtown parkades and on elementary school rooftops, and pioneering outdoor daycares in parks.

The tide has started to turn, they say.

B.C.'s new NDP government has touted its recent push toward universal child care as "one of the largest social policy changes in B.C.'s history." The government's spending, announced last year, of $1.3 billion over three years is more than double the amount spent yearly on

child care under the previous government. The spending includes a program to reduce fees at licensed child care facilities and a benefit for families earning up to $111,000. The government says these have, together, saved B.C. families more than $200 million since they were launched last year.

While parents, advocates and workers have welcomed these recent moves, they also say the province is so far behind that it's really just a good start.

"As good as all of that is, the child care chaos had been allowed to get so bad over the preceding years — it was completely ignored and left to the market — that it takes more than one good budget to fix," Gregson said.

Universal child care is not new or radical in much of the world, advocates said. Canada has long ranked well behind other developed countries in spending on early childhood education as percentage of GDP, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. The OECD has issued reports urging the Canadian government to increase child care spending.

And B.C. ranked near the bottom among provinces for such spending in 2017, according to the most recent Early Childhood Report, which evaluates child care in Canada. While Zak says recent innovations and spending in Vancouver have put the city ahead of others in the region and in B.C. by some measures, daycare remains particularly problematic in Canada's least-affordable city.

One of the main planks of the B.C. NDP's election campaign in 2017 was $10-a-day daycare. And while that promise remains unfilled for the vast majority of B.C. parents, a few families were fortunate enough to find spaces in one of the 53 licensed facilities in the province selected last year as $10-a-day "prototypes."

For parents, the provincewide rollout of $10-a-day child care probably can't come fast enough. But Gregson, who has been the spokeswoman for the B.C. $10-a-day Child Care Plan campaign since 2011, years before the B.C. NDP government took up aspects of the plan for its 2017 election campaign, said such a large policy shift takes time.

"There's been more progress in one year than there was in the preceding 16 years," Gregson said. "The advocates, who are really the experts, have said it's going to take 10 years to achieve a $10-a-day system that's available to all families."

The B.C. government, she said, has done a lot of good work on affordability.

"The piece where they're falling down is they're not coordinated in how they're going to build the public system to create the more than 100,000 new spaces we need."

'Winning the lottery'

As expensive as housing is in Metro Vancouver, many families find their monthly child care costs approach or exceed their mortgage or rent. Many families call their daycare bill their "second mortgage."

That's why parents fortunate enough to land a spot in a $10-a-day prototype have said it "fundamentally changed their lives," said Emily Gawlick, executive director of the Early Childhood Educators of B.C. "We've heard stories from people who were able to go and buy fresh fruit for the first time in months."

The median monthly price for child care for infants and toddlers in the city of Vancouver is $1,407, the Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre reports. A spot in the $10-a-day program is about $200 a month.

A family with three children in the Novaco daycare in North Vancouver, the North Shore's only $10-a-day prototype, will save more than $35,000 a year in child care, estimates Arisha Latif, the early childhood education coordinator for North Shore Neighbourhood House, which operates Novaco.

The shortage of spaces affects not only the parents who can't find space — it affects their children. A wide range of research, in Canada and internationally, has shown the benefits of high-quality early childhood education.

A 2012 special report from TD Economics says: "Not only do high-quality early childhood education programs benefit children, they also have positive impacts on parents and the economy as a whole. Several studies show that the benefits of early childhood education far outweigh the costs."

A stubborn, crucial problem remains: Even if the province provided enough funding to make every licensed daycare space in the B.C. $10-a-day tomorrow, there simply aren't nearly enough spaces. Internal City of Vancouver research, provided to The Vancouver Sun, shows the city's calculations earlier this year pegged the "current shortfall of licensed child care spaces" at 16,274 spaces.

Provincewide, Gregson conservatively estimates that the shortfall is probably more than 120,000 spaces.

The shortfall is calculated using factors such as census data, licensed child care records and considerations around the number of families who want to access licensed child care and how many would opt for a different arrangement — such as a stay-at-home parent or full-time nanny — even if licensed care were available.

Documents prepared by Vancouver's social policy and projects department show that, for ages three to four, child care shortfalls exist in 17 of Vancouver's 22 neighbourhoods. For children under age two, the city's research shows shortfalls in all 22 neighbourhoods.

Fifty-three child care facilities around the province, including eight in Vancouver, were selected as $10-a-day prototype sites, chosen from more than 300 applications by an expert panel, using criteria including geography, population and program types. When the government made the announcement in November, parents scrambled to learn if their kids' daycare was on the list.

“Parents broke down in tears when they heard the news that their child was enrolled in a prototype centre,” Gregson said. “But, of course, for the family down the street who’s not in a prototype centre, they’re still paying $1,500 a month.”

In conversations with advocates, parents and government staff, the same expression comes up repeatedly: Getting a spot in a $10-a-day prototype site is like “winning the lottery.”

That’s a problem, Gregson and other advocates say. If the $10-a-day prototype program is life-changing for parents and if those daycare spaces give their children such a significant head start in their lives, should something so important be so unlikely — and so dependent on luck — that it feels like a lottery?

‘It’s an economic program, not a social program’

Not everyone has the option of leaving kids with grandparents or aunts and uncles, particularly in B.C. Statistics Canada found B.C. ranked ninth among the provinces for the percentage of people who have at least five close relatives. The only province ranking lower than B.C. was Quebec, which also happens to be an outlier in Canada with its markedly higher level of public support for child care.

Since the 1990s, Quebec has had a subsidized universal child care program, which started at $5-a-day and is now based on a sliding scale.

Debate still exists around the merit of Quebec’s approach, but a 2012 University of Sherbrooke study estimated that, in 2008, the province’s universal access to low-fee child care “induced nearly 70,000 more mothers to hold jobs than if no such program had existed.” The report’s authors — a professor of taxation, an economist and a research associate — calculated that additional workplace participation represented a $5-billion boost to the province’s GDP, and “the tax-transfer return the federal and Quebec governments get from the program significantly exceeds its cost.”

Speaking recently about the expansion of publicly supported universal low-fee child care, B.C. Premier John Horgan said: “It’s an economic program, not a social program.”

Horgan made the comment while seated at the lunch table at Novaco daycare in North Van, in conversation last month with Safina Kaba, a worker there who’s also a parent benefiting from the facility’s selection as a $10-a-day prototype.

While Kaba chatted with the premier, her four-year-old daughter Zoya played nearby. Later, Kaba told the Sun that access to a $10-a-day spot meant the family could, for the first time, afford to have Zoya in a licensed group child care setting with other kids and overseen by early childhood education professionals, instead of at home with grandparents.

Kaba’s situation touches another key piece of the child care challenge: labour.

Canadian child care workers, 97 per cent of whom are women, are some of the country’s “most undervalued workers,” said an Oxfam Canada report last month. Almost 90 per cent of child care workers in Canadian daycares have completed post-secondary education in their field, Oxfam reported, but they earn wages nearly 40 per cent lower, on average, than similarly educated women working in other sectors.

That’s why it’s important that the B.C. child care plan also calls for wage improvement in the sector, Horgan said during his visit to Novaco daycare.

Early childhood education is “not babysitting,” Horgan said, and it’s important that professionals in the sector are compensated better.

“People involved with child care are passionate about children. But they’re also passionate about meeting their rent.”

“Housing and providing care for children are the two fundamentals for young families, and if we don’t want to hollow out communities, we have to provide those services in urban centres like the North Shore, like Vancouver, like Victoria, and then suburban communities and rural communities,” Horgan said. “But it starts by creating more spaces.”

With that, Horgan prepared to read the kids excerpts from the official colouring book of B.C.’s Legislative Assembly, to be followed by questions from his young audience seated on the carpet.

“I’ve got some questions to answer,” Horgan said. “It can’t be worse than question period.”

‘Much work to do’

For some families, a spot in a prototype $10-a-day site means the difference between staying in Vancouver, or leaving the city, even the province.

B.C.’s minister of state for child care, Katrina Chen, said when she hears from families benefiting from the new child care spending, whether the fee reduction programs or $10-a-day prototypes, “the most impactful story that I’ve heard is that they can stay in their communities where they live, work and learn. They don’t feel like they’re being pushed out by the cost of living, they’re able to return to work.”

“I always wondered how come child care and early learning was not a top priority for the government until very recently,” Chen said. “And there’s still so much work to do.”

One area advocates have flagged as needing more work is the B.C. New Spaces Fund. It provides money for creating new licensed child care spaces up to a limit of $1 million each for centres run by the public sector, First Nations and non-profit organizations. While that’s double the limit of a similar program under the previous B.C. government, advocates say that even with $1 million in government funding,

many non-profits have trouble securing the other money they need to to build facilities.

Chen said she has heard similar reports, that "$1 million is just not enough to pay for a site."

"It's safe to say we are looking at that, and you are probably going to hear some good news in the coming weeks."

But for advocates like Gregson, even if the government increases grants for non-profits to create daycare spaces, what's really needed is a shift to a public child care system planned and supported by the provincial government, akin to the public school system.

"Depending on entrepreneurs or even the individual non-profits to create 12 spaces here, or 24 there, or 61 there — that is not the way we plan to build elementary schools," Gregson said. "You can't do that and get 120,000 new spaces."

There are several different types of child care in B.C.

The City of Vancouver estimates only 18 per cent of kids in the city are in licensed child care, with legal standards for quality, health and safety. That category includes full- and part-time group care, licensed family child care, and preschools. The remaining 82 per cent of Vancouver kids are in unregulated care, the city estimates. It's believed the provincewide rate is similar.

That doesn't mean unregulated arrangements are unsafe or low-quality, just that standards are not enforced. Unregulated care includes children cared for by relatives, in ad hoc arrangements, and in what's called licence-not-required care, where a caregiver looks after one or two children not related to him or her.

Licence-not-required child care is legal in B.C., but as the government website says: "Since they are not registered or licensed, they are not monitored or inspected and they do not have to meet standards for health or safety." For example, nothing prevents someone with a criminal record providing unregistered, licence-not-required child care.

An additional — and unknown — number of kids are dropped off every day at illegal daycares, where a person or people are caring for more than two unrelated children without licensing. Many parents who drop their children off at such facilities may believe, wrongly, that the facility is licensed. In 2017, an infant died in one such illegal facility in Vancouver.

While those who research and work in this area agree illegal daycares are a serious problem, it's also difficult to know how large a problem it is. The government wouldn't typically know about such illegal, unlicensed child care facilities unless they receive complaints from the public. And it can't provide figures to show whether or not the number of complaints about unlicensed daycares is increasing.

In early May, The Vancouver Sun contacted Vancouver Coastal Health, the agency responsible for inspections of care facilities, to request the number of annual complaints for the last decade for unlicensed and licensed child care centres, and was directed to the B.C. Ministry of Health. A Ministry representative then told The Sun to direct the inquiry to the regional health authority.

The Sun spoke with representatives of B.C.'s five regional health authorities and made written requests for the number of complaints about child care centres. The Ministry of Health representative then requested four weeks to provide the numbers.

As of Friday, a full week past the deadline requested last month by the ministry, the Sun had not received that information.

Meanwhile, Deshpande and her husband are desperately trying to find a new child care provider before their current arrangement ends next month, she said. "Or I won't be able to come to work on the first of August if we don't have anything. It's as simple as that."

"It's not just about me, I know thousands of other people are going through the same thing," she said. "It shouldn't be. But it is."

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