

Child care in Sea-to-Sky region going from 'bad to worse to crisis to chaos'^[1]

Municipalities, provincial government say work is being done to alleviate child-care crunch

Author: Britten, Liam

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EXCERPTS

Elliott Hashimoto spent 18 hours outside in the dark and rain of a Whistler night to get what's become a hot commodity: a child-care spot for his five-year-old son, Bennett.

Hashimoto spent the night of Aug. 10 lined up with dozens of other parents, some with tents and tarps, at the Meadow Park Sports Centre to get one of 54 spaces at Kids on the Go, a relatively affordable child-care option provided by the municipality.

The carpenter said parents all across the region, from Horseshoe Bay to Pemberton, are desperate to find spaces for their kids.

"I think people look at towns like Whistler and Squamish ... as rich-people neighbourhoods," Hashimoto said. "We get left behind."

Experts say the child-care situation in the region is dire.

Suzie Soman, with the non-profit Sea-to-Sky Community Services, said there are approximately 5,100 children in the region who are 12 and younger and only 1,100 child care spaces. Half the children are under the age of five.

It's not a unique problem in B.C. but in this part of the province multiple forces conspire to make it worse: a high cost of living, low wages for child-care professionals, a growing population, and a growing birth rate.

Squamish and Whistler, from 2006 to 2016, were two of the fastest-growing communities in B.C. The number of babies born at the local hospital each year has increased substantially since 2013.

"This is a failure by every level of government in our country to look after our citizens," Hashimoto stated.

New spaces coming

Both Squamish and Whistler sent statements agreeing that child care is an issue in the region. Both said they received grants to study and act on the matter from the province and the Union of B.C. Municipalities.

A Sea-to-Sky school district official said two new child-care facilities are coming thanks to those grants. Combined, they will add 12 infant and toddler spaces and more than 40 preschool-age spaces.

The NDP provincial government made \$10-a-day child care a key election promise in 2017.

In a statement, the Ministry of Child and Family Development said it is topping up wages for early childhood educators and providing grants to communities so they can study and develop new child care opportunities.

'I hate living in Squamish'

While help may be coming, parents like Ashley Bewsky, 33, and Alex Hammond, 31, are struggling right now.

Bewsky has a 14-month-old daughter, Kinley.

She's also a youth probation officer whose maternity leave ends in four months. She hasn't been able to find child care and worries she will have to quit.

"We go down to one income, I guess," an exasperated Bewsky said. "I'm at a point where ... I hate living in Squamish."

Hammond, a social worker, says she found a spot at an unlicensed daycare for her 10-month-old daughter, Reese.

She considers herself lucky but would prefer to have her at a licensed facility.

"You have to do your own due diligence," Hammond explained, adding she had put her daughter on 22 waiting lists before Reese's spot opened up.

Both said they want the best for their kids but also don't want to give up the careers they love.

Closures

Recently, the situation got worse when one private child-care facility in Squamish had to close.

Former daycare manager Lorraine Teanby said Bee Haven Childcare's closure at the end of July meant the loss of 26 spaces. There were 200 children on the wait list.

The cost of keeping the facility open combined with a lack of staff forced the facility to close.

If one Bee Haven worker was off sick, for instance, the facility would not meet minimum staffing requirements.

Early childhood educators aren't paid enough, develop burnout, and often have better opportunities in the public school system as education assistants, Teanby said.

The closing of Bee Haven cost six people their jobs. Parents scrambled to find nannies or even started driving as far as Vancouver for child care, Teanby said.

Soman, with community services, said three family-run child-care operations have also closed in the last six months, for a loss of 21 spaces.

'Crisis to chaos'

Local MLA Jordan Sturdy says the provincial government has not done enough to keep up with the area's growth.

He says more needs to be done to recruit and retain early childhood educators: improvements to their wages and better recognition of credentials from workers outside the province.

Sharon Gregson, spokesperson for Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C., blamed the previous Liberal government for letting the situation get to where it is now.

"Child care has gone from bad to worse during that time," Gregson said, noting parents will likely have to wait years for solutions. "From bad to worse to crisis to chaos, actually."

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