

Daycare dilemma: More than half of Manitoba parents struggle to access the child care they need, survey says ^[1]

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Source: Winnipeg Free Press

Format: Article

Publication Date: 8 Sep 2019

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Marie-Serge Bibeau says she's one of the lucky ones. As soon as she got pregnant, people advised her to get on the list for a child-care spot. Ultimately, she only had to wait five months: one-third of the average wait time.

"It's really stressful; it doesn't give people the initiative and the motivation to go back to work," said Bibeau, who lives in Lockport.

Although Winnipeg has some of the country's most affordable daycare, a Statistics Canada survey has found 52 per cent of Manitobans struggle to access spots, the highest rate in Canada.

The spots that do appear seem to exist in higher-income areas.

Bibeau herself ran out of money while waiting for a spot. She didn't have relatives who could take care of her baby. So instead of returning to work, she ended up on welfare.

"I was actually on EIA (Employment and Income Assistance) for that period of time, which I'm ashamed to say — and it's because I could not find child care," she said.

The daycare she did find was far from her workplace. Each day she had to rush to drop off and collect her daughter because her shift was during business hours.

"It's a whole process," she said. "The demand is there, and it's one of those things that's always going to be there."

While all provincial parties have pledged to boost funding for child care, advocates argue it will take more than cash to fix the problem.

"Until you get to the real heart of the issue, it's going to keep coming up," said Don Giesbrecht, head of the Canadian Child Care Federation.

The perpetual problem

Earlier this year, Statistics Canada surveyed the parents of 7,548 children under five years old across Canada.

The snapshot survey found that 51.9 per cent of Manitobans "had difficulty finding child care," compared with 36.4 per cent nationally.

The survey found that parents postpone their return to the workplace, cut back hours and use a mix of arrangements to get their kids looked after.

Parents told researchers they couldn't access daycare due to everything from cost, to location, to quality.

Giesbrecht said governments have to tackle all those factors at the same time, if they want to get at the problem.

"Typical solutions offered in this country are Band-Aids or one-offs, rather than being holistic solutions," said Giesbrecht, who used to run a daycare in St. James.

As of 2015, 74 per cent of two-parent families with a child under five years had both parents in the workforce.

Despite that high demand, cities across Canada go from having not enough spots, to unaffordable options, to a shortfall in staff to adequately staff centres that have enough funding.

"We keep circling back to the same topics," he said. "It's perpetual."

A quasi-public system

Since 1983, Manitoba parents have paid a set fee for child care, with the province subsidizing non-profit providers to make up for their costs. Low-income families get stipends.

The model is similar to Quebec and Prince Edward Island, but access in those provinces is higher, with a regulated child-care space for 39.4 and 38.4 per cent of children respectively, compared with the 23.8 per cent rate in Manitoba.

There are many reasons. Manitoba has not changed the cap on parental fees since 2013. The province has also frozen most operating grants since 2016. In Manitoba, 95 per cent of child-care centres are non-profit, and they have to transfer their assets to other non-profits if they dissolve.

Susan Prentice, a University of Manitoba sociology professor who specializes in child-care policy, sees a disjointed system that's held up by subsidies, stipends and grants, instead of simply having the government provide child care.

"It's like we've taken half the step to making it a public service. This is a province vacillating over its role in ensuring that parents have access to child care." — Susan Prentice, University of Manitoba sociology professor who specializes in child-care policy

"It's like we've taken half the step to making it a public service," Prentice said. "This is a province vacillating over its role in ensuring that parents have access to child care."

In its last months of government, the NDP commissioned the Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care Commission, which concluded in January 2016.

It recommended that the province benchmark child care to cost 10 per cent of the average income of a two-parent family, and use a sliding scale with a cap for the highest earners.

It also urged a synchronized system to make sure early-childhood educators can get training, and that the courses available meet projected market needs.

Manitoba Child Care Association's executive director Jodie Kehl said the PC government hasn't implemented any of the 2016 report's recommendations.

"It's a large, systemic issue," she said, arguing recommended industry wages are particularly ignored.

Most front-line child-care workers make from \$13 to \$18 per hour, which the association argues is only appropriate for those starting out.

While the province does offer a pension plan, the low wages make child care an unattractive field. There is a dearth of qualified people to run new centres.

"We can't open up new places without addressing the workplace shortage," Kehl said.

Instead, the PCs have introduced a child-care centre development tax credit, which rebates up to \$10,000 per child for companies that provide day care.

The Pallister government has wagered that private operators will help fill the gaps while keeping costs low. Kiehl says she needs to see proof of that assertion, arguing Manitoba's non-profit model is the envy of other provinces.

In June, the province issued a request for proposals for a consultancy firm to review the funding model for daycare in Manitoba.

The scope of the review is blocked by a confidentiality agreement and advocates wonder what's on the table.

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Region: Manitoba ^[3]

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