

The cost of inaccessible childcare in B.C. is higher than we might think ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When Jaycee Elsby moved to Kamloops this year, she naturally pursued her chosen career as an education assistant. She already had eight years experience, so she was prepared to take a position at School District 73.

But she doesn't have the job now. She couldn't afford to take it.

"I couldn't take the job because I couldn't get daycare for all of my kids," Elsby says. "When I moved here, I didn't have family or friends here, so I relied on what is available... That's not realistic. I know there are women here who are pregnant and already have their names on a list for childcare. No matter how much time they would've given me, I'm not even entirely sure I would've found it, especially for my specific needs."

Elsby says she initially searched Kamloops for a daycare program which could take her four daughters together but couldn't even find two programs to split her daughters into.

"I'm a single mom with four kids, I know how it's tough to find daycare and I hear from everybody that they're on waitlists," Elsby says.

While Kamloops appears to be a particularly difficult place to find daycare — let alone affordable daycare — it's not alone in the province for dealing with the problem, punctuated by the province-wide Stroller Brigade, which took place in Vernon, Kelowna, Penticton and Kamloops last month to bring attention to the \$10-a-day childcare campaign. Currently, the B.C. government is testing 50 prototype childcare centres for \$10 per day, but some parents want to ensure it is still available, and preferably expanded, by the time the pilot project wraps up in March 2020.

Across the Thompson-Okanagan, cities are participating in childcare surveys and studies to create a clearer picture of what is needed and what is available. In Kamloops, social and community development supervisor Natalie Serl is overseeing the childcare review. Although figures are not yet available, she says her team understands there is a lack of spaces available.

"We know there is a substantial shortage of childcare options in our community and in the coming months we'll be able to share the findings in greater detail," Serl says. "We are currently analyzing the data and a report will be ready for council around March 2020."

Elsby's own struggle with childcare comes not only from the lack of availability but also due to the high costs of such care. She realized it would be next to impossible to pay fees for four children. She says her education assistant position often relies on on-call work, meaning she would have to find full-time daycare for her kids in case of an unexpected call or extended work day.

"If I'm working as an education assistant, I work five-and-a-half hours a day, so it's not quite even full-time," Elsby says. "The pay isn't terrible but it's not full-time and I would have to pay for four kids to have a full-time spot."

Elsby used to rely on friends and family to watch her children but is discovering the difficulty of finding professional childcare since moving to Kamloops. Elsby says she has scoured the Kamloops job market for something to fit her schedule but soon realized she would have to work from home and watch her kids herself to bring in any income.

"I looked into some evening housekeeping but my resume is made for the education system. I clean up after four kids but I'm not specifically trained for housekeeping... I think my resume kind of gets overlooked for stuff like that," Elsby says. "It's really frustrating for me because I do have skills to go to work. I have my bookkeeping certificate, I have my education certificate, I have administrative experience... but I cannot actually go do those things because I can't go to work because I can't afford the daycare for my own kids."

Now, Elsby has decided to use her predicament as an opportunity to help parents facing a similar struggle.

"It's super hard in Kamloops for people to even find daycare, let alone put siblings in daycare. So I looked it up online for what you can do as an at-home care provider, and you can take a group of siblings or two kids, so I'm leaning more towards a group of siblings because I know how hard it is to afford and I know it's nearly impossible to find... I realize how much of a struggle it is for other parents to find daycare

when they have more than one kid,” Elsby says. “Offering childcare, that would help me as well as another mom. It’s beneficial to both.”

Elsby’s story is not a new one. It has been noted before how parents often need to move, change their careers, or quit their jobs just to reckon with childcare. She hopes the childcare system in B.C. can improve to provide access for all families, regardless of location, income or scheduling needs.

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