

Childcare an essential service ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

If you're an Alberta parent, you're probably no stranger to the prohibitively high costs of most childcare services.

Whether you have one child or several, you've likely crunched the numbers on whether it's more cost-effective to put your child in daycare or just quit your job to look after them yourself, as St. Albert's Stephanie Kirk was forced to do. If you're a single parent, you may be facing the stress of figuring out how to pay for childcare on top of all your monthly bills.

The data shows you're not alone in having to face these sorts of decisions. In January, a report from the Edmonton Social Planning Council – a non-profit social research organization – revealed childcare can be the second-highest household expense, after rent, and can reach as much as 67 per cent of a family's monthly income.

The report cited research from Manitoba that found investment in childcare returned more money to the local and broader economy than it cost, and created jobs. The report also found that affordable, accessible childcare helps lower child poverty rates.

Alberta has spent the past several years experimenting with \$25-a-day daycare. Two daycare locations in St. Albert are taking part in that program, which comes to an end in March 2021. A government evaluation of the first year of that program, released in March of 2019, found the program cut childcare costs in half for the average parent and helped get a vast majority of parents back to work or school.

Gazette reporter Jennifer Henderson has heard from dozens of St. Albert parents who struggle with childcare, and you can read about some of their struggles on page 14. Henderson also heard from childcare professionals who worry about what will happen when the pilot program comes to its end. While it's uncertain whether the program will extend beyond March 2021, the UCP government has said access to affordable, quality childcare is a priority for them. Given the economic benefits of childcare in getting parents back to work, it would make sense for the program to continue in some fashion.

That's not to say there aren't problems with the pilot system in its current form. After all, the program funded daycares, not the individual children, and has come under scrutiny for not requiring income testing. That means low- and middle-income parents who may struggle the most to cover childcare costs don't get priority over higher income families.

Thankfully, there are already models of affordable daycare working elsewhere in Canada and the world. In our upcoming Wednesday paper, Henderson will explore the pros and cons of some of those solutions, and whether or not they could help inform Alberta's eventual review of the \$25-a-day pilot.

Government has a responsibility to ensure essential services are affordable to all. Childcare is one of those services.

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