

Workers, parents protest loss of living allowance for child care workers^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Dozens of child care workers and parents protested the impending loss of their northern living allowance by rallying outside the office of Tany Yao, UCP MLA for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, on Tuesday morning.

The Alberta Government is cancelling the monthly northern living allowance for Wood Buffalo's child care workers in July. The subsidy is worth \$12,480 annually.

Brittany Irvine, a child care worker at Children First, said the cut will represent one-third of her pay.

"For us, that means we're most likely not going to afford to work and pay for child care," she said. "We'll be paying more for childcare than we'll be taking home."

Both Irvine and Cassandra Penney, who also works at Children First, have two kids each in child care. Penney said child care fees for her own children would cost approximately \$3,000 per month.

"It kind of forces us out of the field that we love and are so passionate about," said Penney. "It sucks because we really do have to really consider can we stay in this field or do we have to leave?"

Irvine said she's worried cuts will mean more staff turnover and a drop in care quality for children.

The protesters were also unhappy with the end of the Child Care Accreditation Funding Program on April 1. The program was voluntary, allowing child care facilities to show they meet a standard "over and above the provincial licensing regulations and family day home standards."

The program is being replaced with "professional development and one set of wage top-up rates." This will be available to all licensed child care programs. Details have yet to be announced by the government.

"Without the site visits and the people there to help us improve, our centres won't be as high quality as what they are now," said Ashley O'Toole, who works at Children First.

"It's going to affect the children because then they're not going to have quality care. They may not learn properly," she said. "We're not babysitters, we teach them, we guide them and then the parents are also affected. How would they go to work if we lose staff?"

The cuts won't just affect the workers. Erin Schwab was at the protest with her four-year-old daughter, Poppy, to show support. She is worried finding childcare locally will become increasingly difficult with the new legislation.

"I went to school for six years to get my masters and I believed that I could have a career and have a family and have children," she said. "Quality childcare is what allows me to be able to participate in the economy and support myself and not be reliant on anyone."

Melanie Mazerolle is a single mom who also works in childcare.

"I don't do what I do because of the money, I do it because I love it," she said. "If I can't support myself and my family doing what I love, then I'll have to relocate and change jobs."

Cutting subsidy a hard decision to make: Yao

In an interview, Yao said removing the subsidy was a difficult decision for the province to make. He acknowledged some daycare operators may raise their fees, which could impact low-income families. However, he hoped the region's existing social services would be able to help those families.

He also argued some public and private child care spaces in Fort McMurray were not getting the subsidy and will not be impacted by the new legislation.

"This didn't go lightly with the minister," said Yao, who added he would be meeting with the child care workers again.

Laila Goodridge, UCP MLA for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche, said the subsidy was introduced in 2007 during Fort McMurray's last oilsands boom. Since then, the cost of living and housing has dropped. She also argued child care costs in other parts of the province are higher than Fort McMurray's average.

One private daycare operator supporting the new legislation is Kyla Penner, operator of Fort McMurray-based KPSquared Playhouse.

"The needs and legislation that is currently operating leaves a gap voiced by our community, such as extended hour and overnight care, leaving families substantially impacted without regulated child care," she said in a statement. "In my opinion, the reaction of many which has left parents without care has done more harm to the care of your children than the effect of the accreditation changes that are being made."

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