

Feds respond to COVID-19 child-care frustrations with \$625M cash infusion ^[1]

Author: Turnbull, Sarah

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EXCERPTS

OTTAWA -- The federal government is allocating \$625 million to support the child care sector, as demands intensify for government action to help parents return to work after pandemic lockdowns.

Minister of Families, Children and Social Development Ahmed Hussen said Friday that the investment will ensure "enough safe and affordable child care spaces available to parents as they gradually return to work," and is part of the federal government's \$19-billion Safe Restart Agreement with provinces and territories.

Parents and child care activists have long been pushing all levels of governments for action to help transition children safely back to school and other daycare facilities following months-long shutdown from the pandemic. As bars, golf courses, gyms and other recreational facilities get the first opportunity to reopen, many have argued politicians' priorities are out of touch.

Hussen said the funds are in addition to the money already directed to provincial and territorial child-care needs, distributed through the Early Learning and Child Care Bilateral Agreements.

"This investment is in addition to the \$1.2 billion over three years was distributed to the provinces and territories, starting in 2017-18, to support early learning and child care and create up to 40,000 more affordable child care spaces," the ministry's press release read.

"This investment through the Safe Restart Agreement will help address the key priorities agreed upon by Canada's First Ministers for the safe restart of Canada's economy over the next six to eight months."

Women have been particularly hard hit by the shutdown of schools and child-care centres, taking on the majority of at-home family duties.

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The federal government took note of this trend in its fiscal snapshot released early July, stating that men have returned to work at a rate twice as fast as women.

"Going forward, employment might be expected to increase somewhat faster among men than women in the coming months given the more rapid increase in goods-producing industries in May and the fact that women are more likely to continue with caregiving responsibilities while child-care facilities remain closed and while school is disrupted," the document reads.

It concluded that any roadmap to economic relief must take into consideration child-care supports so both parents can continue to contribute to the labour force.

Hussen said there are federal accountability provisions within the bilateral agreement with provinces and territories to ensure funds are adequately circulated as child care remains within their jurisdiction.

"[The measures] keep track of how those federal dollars are used by provinces and territories," he said.

Asked whether the \$625 million will be substantial enough to cover the costs of additional personal protective equipment, staffing requirements, and physical space, Hussen said the one-year investment must be viewed in conjunction with existing payments.

"[It] is a significant amount of money and it's the highest amount of money that the Government of Canada has ever transferred to provinces and territories for early learning and child care."

He said he also expects his provincial and territorial counterparts to "do their part" and follow through with their own individual support measures.

NDP MP and families, children and social development critic Leah Gazan says the amount is nowhere near needed to "stabilize" the child-care sector and doubled down on her party's ask to establish a universal, public system.

"If the Liberals really cared about families and parents who have to make the difficult decision between going back to work and taking

care of their kids, they would invest the \$2.5 billion required to build a universal child care and early learning system," said Gazan in an emailed statement to CTVNews.ca

"There is no recovery if parents can't go back to work, particularly women. Child care shouldn't be treated as a nice to have, but as a must have. Federal investment in universal and public child care is crucial now more than ever."

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