

Nothing 'off the table' as federal NDP calls for \$2 billion infusion into child care^[1]

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EXCERPTS

NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh wants Ottawa to ante up with an immediate \$2-billion cash infusion to provinces to support child care and families during the economic restart.

And leveraging NDP support critical to the survival of the Liberals' minority government to get the substantial investment is a play his party will consider, Singh said.

"We are not taking any option off the table. All options are open," Singh told *Canada's National Observer* on Friday.

"Our focus though is fighting for people. And in this particular case, making sure families... and particularly women, get access to child care.

"We will leave all options on the table to achieve that end."

The \$2-billion dollar ask is the bare minimum needed to maintain child-care spaces that existed before the pandemic, hiring new staff and to cover costs associated with enacting new pandemic safety protocols, said Singh.

Even before the pandemic, the child-care system was in trouble, he added.

"There is a massive child-care crisis, and COVID-19 has just amplified what we already knew was a problem," Singh said, adding women are disproportionately affected by the negative effects of the pandemic.

Their participation in the labour force has dropped from a historic high to its lowest level in more than 30 years, Singh said, **citing a recent study.**^[3]

As a result, Singh is also calling for a further \$10 billion from Ottawa over the next four years to move towards an affordable and accessible universal child-care system.

The economy will not rebound without large investments in child care to ensure all parents, and particularly women, can get back to work, Singh said.

"I really want to press the point that this is an economic recovery piece the same way we make investments to help create jobs," Singh said.

"This is an investment that's going to help us recover, and recover in a way that is just and fair, and ensures that women are participating in the workforce."

The NDP call for an immediate cash infusion is a good one, said Morna Ballantyne, executive director of the national advocacy organization Child Care Now.

But Ottawa should commit even more funding than the NDP suggests to fully establish a quality, affordable, and accessible federal child-care system, said Ballantyne.

"Particularly as we suspect discussions will be underway now around what will be in the next budget," she said.

The federal government should launch a multi-year spending plan on child care starting with a \$2-billion investment in 2021, and adding \$2 billion each year after that, she said.

This would mean that Ottawa would be spending \$10 billion annually by 2026, said Ballantyne.

This would maintain child-care spaces lost in the pandemic and grow more spaces while keeping them affordable for families, she said, adding current federal funding levels won't achieve that.

Plus, with more cash on table, the provinces would be more inclined to also commit funding for a public nationally co-ordinated plan.

Financial commitment is necessary to fix the cobble-together child-care system that is buckling under the pandemic, Ballantyne said.

Currently, licensed child care across the country, except in Quebec, is a mish-mash of individuals, private operators and community organizations that have set up shop, but can't necessarily meet parents' child-care needs, Ballantyne said.

"We don't have a national approach, we have a patchwork market system," said Ballantyne.

"Parents ... need (to shop around) and try to put together, as best they can, the services they need."

But longtime gaps in the availability and affordability of quality child care and early childhood education have only grown during the COVID-19 crisis, she added.

Even with fee subsidies, the cost of child care is still too high for many parents, particularly with the economic strain households are experiencing now, Ballantyne noted.

Even if parents can pay for child care, many providers aren't — or won't — open, she said.

In the pandemic's initial stages, 72 per cent of child-care centres in Canada closed, a national survey on child-care services found.^[4]

Additionally, of the centres that closed, 36 per cent were not certain they would be reopening their doors.

If centres open, they're likely to drop the number of spaces available to maintain social-distancing protocols, which translates into lower revenue and an inability to hire more staff or provide better wages to attract workers, Ballantyne said.

In addition to the funding, child-care advocates want to see the federal government set up a promised secretariat this year to oversee the building of a universal system, Ballantyne said.

Such measures would go a long way to addressing child-care deserts in the country, particularly in rural and remote communities, or barriers to care for Indigenous parents or families of children with disabilities.

"Through the pandemic, we saw the federal government really played an important leadership role in making sure that our country didn't fall apart," said Ballantyne.

"So, we believe the leadership that's been demonstrated now has to be applied in a very serious way to the child-care crisis."

North Island-Powell River NDP MP Rachel Blaney agreed that Ottawa has to do more to help families, particularly those in smaller communities.

"We're definitely hearing from constituents about (lack of) access to child care, so many people may not be able to go back to work," said Blaney.

Many families have already seen their income plummet during the pandemic, and being unable to return to work only aggravates that situation, she said.

The situation is especially hard on single parents, said Blaney.

Working parents are also anxious that schools will shut down suddenly again in the fall, Blaney said.

"They worry about being able to respond," she said.

It was disappointing the Liberal government chose to prorogue Parliament in the middle of a pandemic and economic crisis, Blaney said.

"It's just wrong, in my opinion," she said, adding the move lets down struggling Canadians.

"What we wanted to see was the government working collaboratively with all parties to make sure that we deliver the support required across the country."

Days after the Liberals prorogued Parliament, Deputy Prime Minister and new Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland announced a \$37-billion COVID-19 aid package.

It included extending the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) by a month and tweaked the employment insurance (EI) program so more people qualify for financial assistance during the pandemic. As well, workers are guaranteed 10 days of sick leave if they fall ill or have to self-isolate.

The government also set up a caregiver benefit program.

Ottawa will provide \$500 a week for up to 26 weeks to households where a caregiver can't work and must stay home to care for a child under 12, or a family member with a disability, should schools, daycares or care facilities be closed due to COVID-19.

Those who choose to keep their kids at home won't qualify, but caregivers are eligible for the benefit if a dependent is medically advised not to attend a program because they are at high risk if they catch the virus.

Minister of Families, Children and Social Development Ahmed Hussen was unavailable for comment on if the federal government plans to take steps to set up a universal child-care plan in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

However, the Liberal government has allocated \$625 million to child care from the \$19 billion it provided to the provinces as part of pandemic recovery efforts, the Department of Employment and Social Development

Canada (ESDC) stated in an email Friday.

Paired with the \$400 million already committed to the provinces for child care, the federal government will be providing more than \$1 billion in support this fiscal year, according to the ESDC.

The ESDC did not elaborate whether the federal government planned any further steps to address child-care shortages.

There are plans to work with the provinces and territories to set up a national child-care secretariat to lay the groundwork for a cross-Canada system, but the ESDC would not say when that will happen.

As to what he wants to see in the throne speech, Singh said the NDP's primary objective is to continue securing measures to support Canadians during the pandemic.

The goal isn't to plunge Canadians into an election during the pandemic, Singh said, especially if more "wins" for Canadians can be secured.

"If we can continue to fight and bring in our vision for a more compassionate response to this crisis that takes care of people and supports people, we will," he said.

"But we will not rule out any option if the government continues to go down a path where they are self-serving."

Region: Canada ^[5]

Tags: funding ^[6]
economic recovery ^[7]

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