

Forget a guaranteed basic income. There's a better way to make sure Canadians have enough money after COVID-19 ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

There's a frantic search for a throne speech silver bullet that will resolve the income problems of the pandemic and put us all on a better path.

But a guaranteed basic income is not the answer, despite all the rhetoric and goodwill that has given the idea so much momentum lately.

Childcare, however, just might be, or at least as close as we can get to one.

The beauty of a guaranteed basic income is its simplicity and compassion. The idea of government just making sure everyone has enough money to get by on is attractive to caring and thoughtful people across the political spectrum who believe our society is rich enough to take care of its poor.

That's why it rose to the top of the list of proposals backed by the Liberal party rank and file to take to their convention in November. It's why every political party has had a look at it over the years. And it's why the United Church is lighting candles to the idea on the eve of the throne speech next Tuesday.

Canada's social welfare system was designed many decades ago, when workers had regular jobs and regular hours, explains Liberal MP Julie Dzerowicz, who has championed the proposal. It's worth looking at a new system that makes sure everyone has enough money to meet their basic needs, giving them the stability they need to find a job, retrain or fall back on when things turn sour.

But it's deceiving in its simplicity. We already have many well-entrenched programs serving many parts of the population quite well: the generous Canada Child Benefit for almost all families with children; the Guaranteed Annual Income and Old Age Security for seniors; Employment Insurance for those who lose their jobs. Training benefits, low-income worker incentives, housing subsidies, disability credits — they're all designed to support the incomes of specific segments of the population when they run into trouble.

To replace many of them with a single cheque would not only be legally difficult, but would also give the federal government a blunt instrument to deal with the complex and ever-changing problems of poverty, low income and inequality.

For sure, the pandemic has exposed some cracks in the existing patchwork of programs, especially when it comes to Employment Insurance. The federal government began to confront those cracks last month when it announced how it would move millions of people off the temporary Canada Emergency Response Benefit and onto an enhanced EI system. It added on a caregiving benefit, plus a benefit for self-employed people, and increased the basic amount that EI beneficiaries can collect, at least for the next year.

It's a start. The federal Liberals are well aware that it's not a permanent solution, nor does it close all the cracks in the system. People with disabilities and single, working-age adults are still in precarious positions, and require more attention and funding. But solutions are not as easy as just announcing a guaranteed basic income.

Child care, on the other hand, has so many fringe benefits that it's impossible not to relish the thought — and there are many signs that the federal Liberals will make it a highlight of the throne speech next Wednesday.

The pandemic lockdown exposed how central access to reliable and affordable child care is to parents' ability to work, even from home. Now that we have lurched towards some reopening, good child care is essential if we want mothers to maintain their spots in the workforce. And those child-care workers need to be well paid, properly equipped and fully trained if we are all to stay safe and virus-free.

It's become painfully obvious that ensuring that there are enough affordable, high-quality child-care spaces is essential for a recovery.

But the benefits go beyond the near term. High-quality care sets children on the right path for life, levelling the playing field for low-income families. It increases women's participation in the workforce at a time when, over the long run, we need all the workers we can get. So the payback for government spending comes quickly.

The federal government has already earmarked \$625 million for the provinces for pandemic child care, and has indicated a willingness to

flexible in how it issues existing funding to provinces in order to speed up the creation of daycare spots.

But the long-term fix is still lacking in both funding and design.

The federal Liberals promised in their last election campaign to fund before- and after-school care for school-aged children. But they've also been unsuccessful at implementing a national child-care program in the past.

This time, it looks like they're listening carefully to advocates and experts, and indicating heavily that they're ready to take another run at it.

"A national child-care program with available, affordable, high quality, inclusive and flexible child care is doable," says Martha Friendly, executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit and at the top of the federal government's contact lists these days.

It would require serious federal funding, heavy negotiations with the provinces and some stringent requirements to make sure the money is spent productively. The payoff would make it all worthwhile, and give us all some peace of mind.

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