

What a national child-care program could mean for the GTA — home of high fees, low wages and long wait lists ^[1]

Canada's 5 most expensive cities for child care are all in the GTA

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EXCERPTS

Child-care advocates in Toronto say the creation of a national program proposed by the federal government could drive major improvements in a city that's home to one of the most poorly functioning child-care sectors in Canada.

Gov. Gen Julie Payette announced in Wednesday's throne speech the government's intention to pursue what could become Canada's first universal child-care system.

"The government will make a significant, long-term, sustained investment to create a Canada-wide early-learning and child-care system," she told the House of Commons.

Although the speech included few details about what that system would look like, or when the Liberal government intends to have it ready, people in Toronto welcomed the news as a possible sign of relief for a sector that's endured years of systemic problems and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Toronto has the highest child-care fees in the country and at the same time, early childhood educators are still making minimum wage — this is the challenge that's before us," said Carolyn Ferns, the public policy and government relations coordinator at the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

Toronto has for years been Canada's most expensive city for child care, with an average infant daycare fee of \$1,774 per month in 2019, according to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA).

The cities of Markham, Vaughan, Oakville and Mississauga round out the top five, cementing the Greater Toronto Area's status as Canada's most expensive urban area for child care.

"It has become evident that child-care fees in Canada are lowest when services receive substantial public operational funding and the fees are set as a matter of public policy," reads the CCPA report.

High fees and low wages at the heart of Toronto's problems

Industry advocates say the high fees and long wait lists facing many parents can only be resolved by a universal system accompanied by a significant increase in funding, which the Liberal government appears to have promised.

"There's a point in time now where we have an opportunity to really change the way that the system functions and look at what it is that families need," said Lidia Monaco, vice president of strategic initiatives at The Neighbourhood Group, which operates 10 non-profit child-care centres in Toronto.

The Neighbourhood Group's newest child-care centre opened last year and was filled to capacity just three minutes after registration opened, Monaco said.

Some Toronto families, she noted, don't have the means to pay for a spot, given the city's high fees and lack of access to subsidies.

"There's a lot of families that can't afford child care, so it makes it very difficult," Monaco added.

Experts say the implementation of a national program would lower costs for families since child-care centres would no longer have to rely on parent fees to stay afloat.

Increased funding could also improve wages in the industry, which could in turn make it easier to hire and retain education workers.

"As wages go up, parent fees go up, and this conflict is never really resolved," said Alana Powell, executive coordinator for the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario.

"We really need an investment soon to address these issues."

National program could help women get back to work

A more affordable and accessible child-care system has also been described as a critical element of Canada's recovery from the massive economic downturn caused by COVID-19.

Advocates say a more affordable and accessible child-care system will result in more women returning to the labour force after having children.

In Quebec, which generally has the lowest child-care fees in Canada, 81 per cent of women participate in the workforce, compared to 75 per cent in Ontario, according to a 2018 report by Statistics Canada.

The gap grows larger when focusing solely on women with a child under three years of age. In Quebec, 80 per cent of mothers with young children participate in the labour force, compared to 69.5 per cent of Ontario women with young children.

Ferns said Ottawa and provincial governments must act quickly and build up the program for Canada, and Canadian mothers, to have a swift recovery from the current downturn.

"[A national program] supports not only families, and especially women, it also supports the economy," said Monaco.

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