

\$25-a-day daycare applauded as good first step, but more needed to fix 'a broken system': advocates ^[1]

N.L. budget promises to create 8,000 affordable spaces starting in 2021

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EXCERPTS

Budget 2020 delivered on a key leadership race promise from Premier Andrew Furey of \$25-a-day daycare, and people pushing for such improvements say it's a good first step, but much more is needed for Newfoundland and Labrador's uneven child-care system.

Wednesday's budget included \$3 million for the program for the first three months of 2021, which would subsidize 8,000 spaces in regulated child-care homes and centres. The overall cost of the program is \$12 million annually.

"I'm really happy that the affordability aspect is front and centre, for sure," said Gillian Pearson, the founder of Parents for Affordable Childcare NL.

Pearson said the Liberal plan could mean the difference for some parents — particularly mothers, who have been hit disproportionately hard with child-care problems during the pandemic — rejoining the workforce.

"You are going to get a lot of families who are within a certain income threshold where that's going to be the difference about whether the woman goes back to work or not," she said.

Likewise, Furey has cited the plan as an economic driver to bolster the working population, and provincial government politicians from all parties have found an uncommon common ground in the idea. Leaders of both the NDP and PCs endorsed the measure, with the PCs having also previously included the \$25-a-day plan in their policy platform.

But to Pearson and other child-care advocates, getting the cost down "is only one small piece of the puzzle," she said.

"An entire overhaul of the system is needed, but this is just one step towards that."

A complicated system

While \$25 sounds like an affordable, easy-to-understand number, the child-care system in Newfoundland and Labrador is anything but.

Daycare can mean a wide variety of things, at varying prices, of varying quality, and with varying regulatory oversight.

In unveiling the plan, the Liberals said the average amount paid for an infant space — a child under the age of two — is \$44 a day, while a preschooler space for ages three and up costs an average of \$30. Some low-income families can avail of subsidies to make care free or close to it.

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Robyn LeGrow

But those figures apply to regulated spaces and don't truly reflect child-care costs in Newfoundland and Labrador — or how many children would be left out of the new program. Unregulated child care abounds in the province, although it is untracked and therefore unaccounted for in any budget tallies.

In those cases, operators usually work out of their homes as unlicensed daycare providers who must cap the number of children in their care or their working hours in order to comply with provincial legislation, while others work entirely under the table.

"Our entire daycare system has been built just basically as a patchwork," said Robyn LeGrow, the chair of the Jimmy Pratt Foundation, a non-profit organization that lobbies for changes to early childhood education in the province.

"We have so many unregulated day homes that are offering fabulous programming, but might be left out of this because they don't have the proper ratio for bathrooms, or that sort of thing. We have to look at this broken system that we do have, and examine it, and build it

from scratch."

Education Minister Tom Osborne told CBC News one hope for the new subsidy is that it will encourage unlicensed operators to join the regulated system — a process laced with requirements such as potential and costly infrastructure renovations.

Thousands left out?

With 8,000 spaces to be covered under the budget's plan, it's unclear how many families will be left out.

According to statistics from the provincial government, as of July 1 there were 20,402 children under the age of four in Newfoundland and Labrador, although not all of those require child care.

"We need to make sure that there are enough spaces, first of all, and those spaces are available in rural and urban contexts," said Pearson.

"Affordability doesn't mean a whole lot to families who have children with disabilities, for example, and have trouble accessing inclusion spots, or families in rural areas [where] there is no availability of child care at all."

With the daycare announcement slim on details, both Pearson and LeGrow want to see more information, soon.

"Are there bigger and broader plans to address accessibility and quality of these spaces?" said Pearson.

"There's still many, many many questions that the entire community will be asking and are still wondering," said LeGrow.

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