

Child care cash remains parked ^[1]

Province has paid out only 20 per cent of fund

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EXCERPTS

The Manitoba government has paid out only 20 per cent of a fund that was created to expand child care.

In August, the province announced the \$8.5-million fund to add home and workplace daycare spaces as the economy recovered from the pandemic. The Manitoba and Winnipeg chambers of commerce partnered to help administer four streams of one-time start-up grants approved by the Families Department.

On Tuesday, Families Minister Rochelle Squires said that as of March 5, the department had paid out about \$1.69 million.

She issued the statement after the NDP said its freedom of information request showed that only \$72,000 had been paid out as of last month. The information showed 11 grant applications, totalling \$33,000, had been disbursed by the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce and 13 approved applications, totalling \$39,000, had been disbursed by the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce.

"I'd like to know what's happening to this money," said NDP Leader Wab Kinew. "They're not spending it on child care. That's a reflection of the government's priorities," Kinew said.

The minister's statement said: "I announced last week that much of these remaining funds are being transferred to the new \$11.5-million Child Care Sustainability Trust, which will support child-care centres as an endowment fund to help them in acquiring resources and upgrading facilities. The trust, to be managed by the Winnipeg Foundation, will provide grants to support innovative projects that improve access, learning opportunities and inclusivity at child-care facilities. The initial intake for applications began today, and will close on March 30."

Parents and supporters of early child education, meanwhile, are bracing for the release of a \$599,000 review of provincial child care by KPMG, and legislation introduced by the Tory government. Bill 47, The Early Learning and Child Care Act, was introduced in November, but its contents have not been made available to MLAs or the public.

A letter-writing campaign asks MLAs to support not-for-profit licensed daycares and early child education, and urges them not to abandon a longstanding system that has worked for 38,000 children and families.

"We need to protect the spaces we have," said Jodie Kehl, executive director of the Manitoba Child Care Association.

Manitoba's online child-care registry had more than 16,000 children on the waiting list in June 2018, the last time it was updated before COVID-19 struck.

At the onset of the pandemic, the province introduced the Manitoba Child Care Search Tool to help essential service workers identify which facilities were open and where there were vacancies, Kehl said. In early February, it indicated there were 5,200 vacant child-care spaces. That was an anomaly, not a trend, said Kehl.

"It's a unique time for child care... Yes, there may be some spaces available currently, but I don't think it's indicative of where we will be as time goes on."

The vacancies are temporary and the result of the pandemic, said University of Manitoba Prof. Susan Prentice.

Last March, all child-care centres, except licensed family homes, closed because of the pandemic. When they initially reopened, it was with lower enrolments and the children of essential workers, she said. "This would have thrown some parents into alternative, unlicensed arrangements," said Prentice, a researcher, in an email.

"Many mothers have lost jobs or hours or both, or are working from home, and may have a spouse who has lost a job or hours or both."

Historical data show there is a sustained demand for child care, with long waits for a licensed space being typical, she said. Once the economy returns to 'normal,' the spaces will quickly be filled, said Prentice.

"In the short term, however, it is very damaging," she said.

Close to 60 per cent of a centre's total revenue comes from parent fees, and they risk bankruptcy during this exceptional time of low enrolment, said Prentice. "Without flush bank accounts to tide them over, an unknown number of licensed facilities may close. This will mean a supply that is already inadequate could be made worse."

Manitoba has licensed child-care spaces for about 19 per cent of children who might need one, compared with the national average of 29 per cent, Prentice said. "We can't afford to lose any of our scarce and precious licensed spaces."

Region: Manitoba ^[3]

Tags: funding ^[4]

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