

'Nothing was available': Rural Albertans desperate for child care

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"It is such a big need for us. It prevents families from moving out here."

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EXCERPTS

Ashley Steinkey remembers when she was so desperate to find child care that she had to move back in with her parents.

The mother of three, who lives in Onoway, could not find a licensed and regulated child care facility in her rural area when her kids – currently 10 and 12 years old – were younger, so took her parents up on their offer to help, and when she was around 30 years old she moved herself, her husband Blake and their three kids into her parents' basement.

"There's nothing in our area for child care," Steinkey explained.

The family, originally from the Onoway area, was living in Spruce Grove at the time. They were considering a move back to Onoway, where they are both originally from, but couldn't find anywhere to take their children. Any place that was available to them was a long drive into the city and then back out for work, making the arrangement untenable.

There were people in the area who would offer to take the kids for the family, but it was all piecemeal and often other moms who were looking to help out.

"Nothing was available for us that was licensed or that was regulated – nothing," Steinkey said.

The Steinkeys finally made the decision to move in with Ashley's parents after she felt she would have to choose between her career running her own travel agency or taking care of her family. Though her job allows her to work from home, she said caring for her three children at the same time was unmanageable.

"We still had to make a decision that either I gave up my career, which I worked so hard for, and I was passionate about and I loved. Or we made this decision that we moved in with them," Steinkey said.

Steinkey, who is the president of the Onoway & District Chamber of Commerce and serves on the Economic Development committee for the region, said child care is one of the main reasons families do not want to move to their area. The area has so much to offer economically, but if anyone comes out with children, then the arrangement won't work with their family.

"It doesn't allow them options," Steinkey said.

Even for those who can find somewhere to take their child, they may have to drive more than half an hour to drop their kid off and then pick them up again.

"It's definitely a rural issue. There's not enough daycares in small towns."

Child care deserts

While finding child care everywhere in Canada can be expensive and challenging, in rural areas of the country, there are often not nearly enough child care spaces for children.

Rural child care sums up everything that is wrong about child care in Canada, said Martha Friendly at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, who has spent her career researching child care and is now the founder and executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit based out of Toronto.

"The problems with rural child care kind of are a really good illustration of what's wrong with child care," Friendly said.

The easiest form of child care to deliver is for a three-year-old, full day, with normal hours in a well-populated area, Friendly said, but as you start to move away from those benchmarks, it becomes more and more difficult to deliver.

This is exemplified by how many child care deserts there are in rural areas of the country.

In Sturgeon County, there are only 10 per cent of the child care spaces needed for kids aged zero to four years old. There are 37 spaces for a population of 355 children in that age group. The Western Alberta (Jasper) area, which includes Onoway, has 20 per cent of the spaces it needs for kids aged zero to four years old, with 462 spaces for 2,280 children. The Morinville area has 23 per cent of the spaces required for the 1,148 children aged zero to four in the region, meaning there is only space for 262 kids.

But just next door in urban St. Albert, the number of spaces jumps dramatically, with 2,195 child care spaces for kids aged zero to four years old, out of a total 3,580 kids in that demographic, which provide 61 per cent of the spaces needed for the kids in the area.

According to a report (Child care can't wait till the cows come home: Rural child care in the Canadian context), in Alberta, as of 2016, roughly 16 per cent of Alberta children aged zero to four live in rural areas, while 19 per cent of kids ages five to nine years old live in rural areas and 21 per cent of Alberta kids ages 10 to 14 live in rural settings.

Market can't solve the problem

Friendly said the biggest problem with rural child care is allowing for market-based solutions to a big social problem.

"One of the main reasons child care is so inequitably distributed is because it's a market," Friendly said.

When a community expands or adds a new neighbourhood, the three levels of government will regulate how the community is built, how big the homes are, they will service the area with water, sewer and electricity, and ensure there are schools and hospitals in the area to serve the growing population but there is no government entity that will ensure early child care is available to families.

Right now, the development of child care spaces in a community is left up to the free market or a non-profit organization. But businesses aren't keen to set up in rural areas where it can be hard to attract and retain qualified staff while responding to the seasonal child care needs of agriculture workers.

Rural child care can be difficult to deliver through the market because of the low-population density in rural areas, coupled with non-standard working hours for agriculture workers. These challenges mean it can be difficult for child care centres to consistently make money to continue to operate and there is little incentive for child care centres to open up in rural regions because it can be hard to turn a profit and child care is almost primarily funded through parent fees, which can be prohibitively expensive. On top of that, rural families often make less money than their urban counterparts, making care even more difficult for parents to afford.

In Edmonton, child care costs rank in the middle of the pack, according to a 2018 study tracking such costs (Child care fees in Canada's big cities 2018 by Martha Friendly and David MacDonald at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives), with the median child care costs come in at \$975 for infants, \$875 for toddlers and \$835 for preschool-aged kids. Rural areas in the surrounding area likely have similar costs.

The long drive

Often, setting up child care in rural areas can be hard, because it can be difficult to find a hub that doesn't require a lot of driving for parents who may already be driving long distances to work every day.

Danielle Clarke, who lives in Lac Ste. Anne County, used to drive 40 kilometres every day to Spruce Grove for child care for her son. The family used to live in Spruce Grove but when they moved out to the county, Clarke heard it was so difficult to get child care in the area that she didn't even try to switch her son to a closer location. Clarke's son also liked his child care centre, so she decided to turn her 15-minute commute to work into an hour drive just to get him to and from daycare.

The decision came with a huge financial cost, said Clarke, who was spending \$75 every few days in gas.

"I ended up having to sell my truck and get a different vehicle just to be able to afford gas. It's stressful. It is very, very stressful," Clarke said.

Now her younger son, four, is in a day home closer to their house and her eight-year-old receives after-school care right next to the school from a friend, but Clarke said day homes can be precarious. Both of the women who run the day homes her kids attend may be closing their doors, due to financial or personal circumstances, which can be the problem with day homes, Clarke said.

"It's always been, 'When is the other shoe gonna drop?' When do you end up not having care and then scrambling again?" Clarke said.

It can be hard to make money with a day home looking after a group of children while also adhering to the regulations in place and with no ability to take sick or vacation time, Clarke said.

When one of her child care providers wants to take a well-deserved vacation, Clarke said she is then looking for alternative child care for just one or two weeks. Right now, Clarke said one of the closest child care options for her two kids is 40 kilometres away, which would then increase Clarke's commute back up to an hour.

Even shuttling her now-eight-year-old child between school and after-school care has been a problem. When her son was in play school, Clarke had to leave work on her lunch break to get him to his child care and then head back to work.

Clarke, who has lived in the area for eight years, said the child care situation in the county is so challenging that many families choose to have one parent stay home.

"It's hard. Most people will just choose not to work. Unless you've had significant education and a career path, you just don't work," Clarke said.

"I do believe it's either majority or close to majority of the people that are able to work are taking their children to parents, family friends out here."

Long work days

On top of the low population density, the non-standard work hours make it hard to operate.

"A lot of people in rural communities, in addition, work non-standard hours or seasonal work – their needs for child care fluctuate ... and that is the most expensive and difficult kind of child care to deliver and pay for," Friendly said.

For families who work in agriculture, they may need to drop their children off in the very early hours on some days to start work when the sun rises. Other families may only need child care during seeding and harvest seasons but can look after their children during the rest of the year.

This can make it difficult for child care providers, who need to rely on steady income to pay staff and rent to keep the business open. Many can't get by with taking kids in seasonally and having those spaces stay empty while the children are at home with their parents. And staffing for very early morning for just a handful of kids can be expensive.

Friendly said most child care fees, between 85 and 95 per cent for not-for-profits, go to paying for qualified staff and so the costs are fixed even if enrolment fluctuates.

Even if a child care centre is able to open up and has been able to get staff to come out the rural centre, finding a building to house the operation can be challenging.

In the past rural centres would use any location possible, like setting up in the basement of a church during the week, Friendly said, and then packing up on Sunday when the church needed the space.

But in rural areas, with fewer capital projects, they just don't have vacant building to set up in.

"They don't have a lot of extra buildings," Friendly said.

And even if they can find a building, they have to find a way to get the building up to the standards of a child care centre, sometimes including things like industrial dishwashers and food safety requirements.

Women in the workforce

Even with so many barriers to opening child care centres, Friendly said rural families are desperate to get child care.

"It's not that people in rural communities don't want child care. It's not that they don't need child care," Friendly said.

But what rural families need is flexible child care that is responsive to their work schedules and family needs, Friendly added.

In previous decades, Friendly said she heard from families who would have their kids around on the farm while both parents worked, but modern day farming is a particularly dangerous workplace that isn't safe for young children, and many farming organizations advocated for child care to keep their kids safe.

From 1990 to 2008 there were 248 farm fatalities for children under 15 years old, averaging 13 per year. Between 2006 and 2015 that number dropped to 84 fatalities.

Now it is too dangerous to have children on the farm while their parents are working, Friendly said, and so families have to find other accommodations for their children.

Often it leaves parents, usually mothers, choosing between their career and their family.

"Lack of child care prevents women from working or working fully, or sometimes working at all," Friendly said.

Steinkey said she wanted to go back to work after having children and she said most moms feel the same way.

"Most moms want to go back to work, but can't because either child care is too expensive, or there's nothing available."

And with few child care options in rural areas, it can hamper rural economic development. With more people moving to cities every year, Friendly said the population density in rural areas continues to decline.

"That doesn't mean just because a minority of the population now lives in rural areas that they shouldn't have child care. We need rural communities," Friendly said.

"It's perfectly possible to have child care in small villages or in urban areas, but the way we have got child care set up mitigates against it."

Steinkey said in the Lac Ste. Anne region, it is hard to attract families to the areas because of the lack of child care and said she hears the complaint constantly from families in the region.

"We see it all the time. It is such a big need for us," Steinkey said.

"It prevents families from moving out here."

Region: Alberta ^[3]

Tags: rural child care ^[4]

mother's labor force participation ^[5]

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