

Ottawa ready to spend billions to boost non-profit, regulated child care across Canada ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

OTTAWA-Non-profit government-regulated child care in Canada will get a massive boost if Ahmed Hussen can pull this off.

Hussen's vision for the federal plan for a national child-care program would direct \$9.2 billion a year of federal money to create more regulated, non-profit spaces; to hire, train and hike pay for early learning and child-care workers; and to lower parent fees to \$10-a-day five years from now.

In an interview with the Star, Ahmed Hussen, the federal minister in charge of building the system, outlined more details of the Liberal dream for a Canada-wide system that he says all provinces, including Quebec, will want in on - one he hopes would survive any future federal government of a different political stripe.

"We know for a fact there are so many parents, especially women with children, who are forced to stay home because they don't have child care. So we're losing as a country from not having that contribution, that talent, those skills," Hussen told the Star by phone on Tuesday.

"I really honestly haven't thought about this as a political issue," he said. "It's really about responding to that plea to finally move on this. This is so long overdue."

Hussen, the federal minister of families, children and social development, said negotiations with provinces which have constitutional responsibility for child care will only officially start after the federal budget is passed in Parliament. It commits to spending \$30 billion over five years, which includes \$2.5 billion to create a nationwide Indigenous child-care system as well.

The Liberals' ambition is the creation of a new, 50-50 shared-cost social program with the provinces and territories, but Hussen said that as long as certain goals are met, Ottawa will provide its full share of "100 per cent federal dollars."

In other words, his office confirmed, provinces will not have to raise or lower their current spending to match the federal funds or risk losing the federal contribution, as long as Ottawa's money is put toward meeting what the Liberals have set out as "targets."

The Star first reported last November that the federal government was considering tying federal child-care money to new national standards. Hussen resisted using the phrase "national standards." But he said Ottawa has clear goals.

Hussen said the federal plan will be expected to fund the non-profit sector.

"We have to be confident that federal dollars are going to regulated space that is adhering to the four principles that I mentioned: affordability, accessibility, high quality and inclusivity."

To get there, Ottawa plans to take its current spending on agreements with provinces and ratchet it up by more than \$8 billion a year. Five years from now, the ongoing federal contribution will be \$9.2 billion a year.

It would be a huge boost. Public budget allocations for regulated child care including provincial and federal funding totalled \$5.8 billion in 2019, according to the University of Toronto.

The federal plan aims to drastically reduce parent fees to allow more parents, especially women, to work, to be more productive at their jobs and to boost economic activity, he said.

By the end of 2022, before the program is fully in place, Hussen expects to see average parent fees across the country - which ranged from \$179 a month in Quebec cities to \$1,774 per month in Toronto in 2019 - reduced by half.

He would not provide a target number of new spaces that Ottawa hopes to open up, but expressed concern that through the pandemic there has been "a small reduction in the percentage of non-profit child-care providers and a small increase in the presence of more for-profit providers."

Across the country there is a patchwork of child-care systems, with daycare offered through a range of for-profit, non-profit or as in some Ontario cities, publicly-funded daycare provided by municipalities.

The University of Toronto's child care resource unit says that there were more than 1.5 million regulated child-care spaces across Canada in 2019, and 5.9 million children under age 12, including 2.2 million under five years of age.

So far, despite early grumblings from Quebec Premier François Legault that Ottawa is stepping outside its jurisdiction, no provincial government rejected the program during early outreach before and after it was announced in the federal budget on April 19, Hussen said.

"Some of them were more enthusiastic than others," he added, while declining to get more specific. Asked if he would keep the same level of spending if the Conservatives won power, Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole was noncommittal.

O'Toole said Conservatives are finalizing "a platform to support families that will give them that flexibility they want ... Canadians will see it's better. It's more flexible and it makes sure regardless of where you are, we want to help families juggling the joys and challenges of working and raising kids."

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