

Trying to get child-care system back on track, Quebec invests in home daycares ^[1]

\$200M announcement just 'first step' in solving daycare shortage, says association

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EXCERPTS

Mireille Martínez-Vega says operating a subsidized family-run daycare was gratifying — but exhausting.

After caring for children 50 hours per week, she says, the "second shift started."

On evenings and weekends, she cleaned, disinfected, cooked snacks and lunches, prepared activities, participated in ongoing training and dealt with mounds of paperwork.

"We never stop, we have little time for leisure, to rest, or for our families," she said. "And if you don't do all the prep, you rush even more."

She couldn't take it anymore and closed her doors for good in 2020.

An Exodus

Martínez-Vega is one of thousands of subsidized daycare operators offering \$8.50 per day child care who have opted to shut down in the past years.

The Family Ministry says there has been a net loss of 4000 spots per year since 2014.

In an attempt to reverse that, Family Minister Mathieu Lacombe earlier this month announced \$200 million over five years, saying the announcement is "probably the most progress subsidized family-run daycares have seen in a decade".

It's part of his plan to "get the daycare system back on track."

Shortage of staff and spots

The system is currently facing a crippling staffing shortage and the ministry says there are 51,000 children on waiting lists, particularly for subsidized spots.

As of March 31, there were 91,604 spots in subsidized family-run daycares, 98,014 in non-profit CPEs (Centres de la petite enfance) and 47,789 in subsidized daycares. Another 70,083 spots are in the private system where parents can write off part of the cost for tax purposes.

More money for family-run daycares

The funding will provide new operators with \$3,500 to offset start-up costs.

Existing daycares could receive \$3,000 dollars per year if they offer six spots. Those working with an assistant and offering nine spots could get an additional \$6,000.

The government also eased some rules, including excluding school-aged children under nine from the operator's ratio if the child is home for short periods, such as before or after school.

The government is betting the comparative ease of opening family daycares will help alleviate the shortage faster. Lacombe says he hopes the money will encourage new people to open daycares, and reduce by half those who close.

The goal is to gain 7000 spots a year for the next three years.

Welcome news

Jing Zhang has operated a home daycare for nine years and welcomes the announcement.

The mother of three says allowing the school-aged children home is a big gain for operators. Before, Zhang would have to pay for after-school programs and spend an hour picking up her children after her daycare closed because her children couldn't come home even if she

was there.

"We can feel that we are being recognized," she says "I think this amount could bring new people to join the program."

First Step

Others are less optimistic.

"It's a good first step," said Isabelle Lebrun, who is a director of a CPE and of what's known as a co-ordinating bureau that oversees more than 100 subsidized family-run daycares in Gatineau.

Lebrun says paperwork and red tape often drive people out of the business.

"There is still a lot to do," she said.

Not enough

Martínez-Vega says the government's new proposals would not have kept her going. She gave up because of how running a daycare ate into family time.

"I opened so I could be with my kids," she says, "but ultimately it was them who always had to wait."

Now she works 15 hours a week in a drop-in daycare centre and says the pay is comparable to when she cared for nine children with an assistant.

"My assistant made more money than I did," she said. "To find an assistant I had to pay her well."

Sweeping consultations

The family minister spent the past month holding provincewide consultations on the daycare system, in preparation for a new daycare bill in the fall.

Lacombe heard from, among others, daycare associations, unions and groups representing municipalities and economic interests.

"My goal is to create one big unified early education service, where ultimately each child can develop to their full potential," Lacombe said.

"But also, so parents can develop their full potential in the workforce."

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