

Cities pressure Ontario to join national child-care plan ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ontario's two largest cities are urging the provincial government to sign on to Ottawa's national child-care program.

Ottawa city council recently approved a motion to ask the province to start negotiating with the federal government regarding its national child-care program, which will cost taxpayers \$30 billion.

The program was unveiled in the 2021 federal budget, which promised the money over five years. By 2022, Ottawa's plan is to cut child-care fees in half. By 2026, it's to make child care cost \$10 a day, on average, per child.

"This is a golden opportunity for Ontario to work with the federal government on this historic partnership," said Riley Brockington, an Ottawa city councillor who co-sponsored the motion.

"A national child-care program ... is essential to the COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery, and would benefit families, children, social well-being, and the economy," the motion reads.

In May, Toronto city council passed a similar motion. In it, councillors asked the province to start talks with the federal government so an agreement could be signed by fall 2021.

Before the 2021 federal budget, London Mayor Ed Holder, a former Conservative MP, wrote a letter in support of a national child-care program. He sent the letter to Ahmed Hussen, the federal minister of Families, Children, and Social Development, and to former Ontario Children's Services minister Todd Smith.

"Ontario needs long-term financial support that is flexible, (so it can) respond to the unique needs of every parent, not a one-size-fits-all approach," said Caitlin Clark, a spokesperson for Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce in response to questions from iPolitics.

"Ontario continues discussions with the federal government, and will negotiate a good deal for Ontario parents — one that provides hardworking families with safe, affordable, and flexible child-care options," she said.

Under a separate plan, the Ford government would create 30,000 child-care spaces, and give parents a tax credit of up to \$1,500 per child.

So far, only Nova Scotia and B.C. have struck agreements with Ottawa.

Other provinces and territories have expressed interest, mainly the Yukon and Newfoundland and Labrador, according to Hussen, speaking to iPolitics in April. No province is in "outright opposition," he said.

"Virtually all of them are very much eager to sit down and negotiate," Hussen said. "And some of them are outright saying, 'Where do I sign? When do I sign?'"

Toronto is by far Ontario's largest city, with over 2.7 million people, according to the 2016 census. Six million live in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), which includes the regions of Peel, Halton, Durham, and York. Ottawa comes in second, with nearly one million people, and London is fifth-largest, with nearly 400,000.

Excluding the GTA, the three cities account for over a quarter of Ontario's total population. Including the GTA, that number jumps to nearly half.

In 2017, care was needed most for children between the ages of two and six, according to recently released Statistics Canada data. Nearly 70 per cent of kids that age were in some kind of child-care program. For children aged seven to nine, that number was around 60 per cent, dropping to about 50 per cent for kids aged 10 to 12.

In the census, age is in five-year aggregates, so it's impossible to know exactly how many children under six live in each city.

Toronto has more than 270,000 children under the age of nine, and the GTA has nearly 650,000. More than 100,000 kids under nine live in Ottawa, while 41,000 of them live in London.

Nearly 1.5 million children younger than nine live in Ontario.

Child-care costs in the three cities are among the most expensive in the country, according to a recent analysis by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, a progressive think tank.

In Toronto, parents pay more than \$22,000 a year for infant care, nearly \$19,000 a year for a toddler, and \$15,000 per year for a preschooler.

In London, parents pay about \$15,000 per year in fees for infant and toddler care. That numbers drops to around \$13,000 per year for preschoolers.

In Ottawa, parents pay about \$12,000 per year for an infant or preschooler, and nearly \$14,000 for a toddler.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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