

Parents say child care in N.L. is verging on a crisis. Will the new government deal change that? ^[1]

Thousands more spaces, pre-K hold promise as parents struggle to stay in workforce

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EXCERPTS

Finding child care has been an all-consuming task for Bernice Keels, but one that's easy to sum up.

"Super stressful," said Keels, who lives in Paradise with her son Sam, 15 months.

"When he was a newborn, there was challenges. And I'm a single mom, by choice. But yeah ... the return to work, and finding child care, has been the biggest challenge," she said.

Keels works for a non-profit organization, with her shifts on evenings and weekends. Her maternity leave was up at the end of March, but she delayed returning to her job for three months, in a scramble to find a child-care provider to look after Sam outside the 9-to-5 norm.

She didn't find it. Keels is back at work, calling on family at the moment to help bridge the daycare gap that she said so many shift workers — often those people working the front lines at hospitals and grocery stores — face.

In Torbay, Chelsea Thomas hasn't been lucky enough to find care during the day for her nearly 14-month-old daughter, Kira, despite joining wait lists before her daughter was born.

Getting by on her fiancé's income isn't working, and they're thinking of switching places for a while. Compounding matters, the couple are both early childhood educators (ECEs): having either of them out of the workforce means there's one less person available to look after others' children.

"It kind of feels like we're going back in time," Thomas said.

"We're a modern family with two children. We both want to be able to work. And we both want to help out with the child-care crisis. But despite our best efforts, we can't both be employed at the same time."

Multi-million dollar deal questions, and answers

Thomas and Keels see merit in Wednesday's \$347-million deal between the federal and provincial governments to bring a slew of changes to the child-care system in Newfoundland and Labrador, including \$15-a-day child care starting in 2022, dropping to \$10 in 2023.

They also see a lot of problems.

"Low child-care fees is good. However, if there's no spaces there ... what is the benefit to us?" Keels said.

"There's no child-care spaces anywhere now. Like everywhere seems to have a wait list. And not just like a couple months wait list, like years."

Education Minister Tom Osborne acknowledged that lowering prices will increase demand, and Wednesday's agreement takes steps to address the child-care crunch, promising 5,800 new regulated child-care spaces by 2025-26.

That would take a bite out of the big gap: there are about 20,000 children under school age in Newfoundland and Labrador, but only 8,100 registered spaces. Children without registered care may be spending their days at unregistered daycares, a hodgepodge of family arrangements or keeping parents out of the workforce altogether.

"[Almost] 6,000 places would be challenging, because there's not enough ECEs to staff centres and homes and things like that," said Meredith Loveys, a board member of the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Newfoundland and Labrador, and an ECE instructor at the College of the North Atlantic (CNA) in Corner Brook.

"But I think if everyone really digs down and advocates and promotes the profession in the sector, I think it is possible. But I think it involves a lot of teamwork from a lot of different areas."

Osborne said the deal lays out the foundations to boost ECE numbers. Expanded early childhood education programs will roll out in November at College of the North Atlantic campuses in St. John's, Corner Brook, Happy Valley-Goose Bay and in Labrador West, he said. Keyin College and Academy Canada are also looking at adding some type of program, he said.

A wage grid is also in the works in addition to current government top-ups to ECE pay.

Loveys said as of September, CNA is adding a badly-needed online program to boost ECE skills. But she also hopes there's a bigger effort made to get people — particularly high schoolers — interested in the idea of child care as a career.

"A lot of people love working with children. They just don't really know about the program and the opportunities there are," she said.

Getting creative for pre-K space

About half of the planned 5,800 new spaces are being earmarked for a pre-K program for all four-year olds in the province. Such an idea has been mulled over for years within provincial government, with the promise now to have it begin in 2023 and expand fully by 2025-26.

"I think it'll make a big difference," said Loveys, and not just for parents in need of daycare.

"Right now, a lot of kids are coming into kindergarten and they haven't had quality child care prior to that. So I think it'll help prepare them with socialization and different emotional skills and self-help skills."

While it's meant to be a voluntary program, it could prove to be a popular one.

"We're anticipating the uptake for pre-kindergarten will be very strong," said Osborne.

Finding the physical space to fit all those four-year-olds is underway, he said. Osborne said the province has the go-ahead from the federal government to repurpose underutilized school spaces, and they are also looking at other government building space, portables or other places.

"Where there is not space available, we'll have to get creative," Osborne said.

The first places to implement pre-K will be in schools that currently have extra space, he said. That could mean rural schools with small student numbers — often in communities without registered daycares — could see the boost soonest.

'It obviously takes time'

The scope of Wednesday's deal is not lost on anybody in the sector, with Loveys calling it "phenomenal."

"We have laid out an ambitious plan. But I also believe that it's an achievable plan to increase the number of spaces and increase the number of ECEs in the province. But I mean, it obviously takes time," Osborne said.

It will take time to train up more people and build or renovate those spaces, and in the meantime in Torbay, Chelsea Thomas is trying to balance hope with her current reality that looking after her own child is keeping her away from her career.

"It's unbelievable. There's nothing I would rather do in this world, and it breaks my heart that it's so hard to do it," she said.

She hopes that along with the big changes, there might be some short-term relief for her and the untold numbers of parents in need of. With a federal election looming, Osborne told CBC News that the child-care deal has been signed and in his view, stands no matter if Justin Trudeau's Liberals are re-elected or not.

"I don't think families and parents and nieces will let them back down from it," said Loveys. "It's something that really needs to happen and it needs to happen now."

Parents like Thomas will be watching.

"If they can follow through with their promises, we might avoid this crisis," she said.

Region: Newfoundland ^[3]

Tags: bilateral agreement ^[4]

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