

Manitoba signs on to federal \$10-a-day child-care plan ^[1]

Plan aims to create 23,000 full-time spaces by 2025-26, increase pay for early childhood educators

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Source: CBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 9 Aug 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Manitoba has signed on to a federal plan to provide daycare at an average cost of \$10 a day in regulated child-care spaces starting next year.

Under the plan, the federal government promises to spend \$1.2 billion to fund early learning and child care in Manitoba over the next five years.

"It is no exaggeration to say that this is the largest child-care deal ever struck by the province of Manitoba in its nearly 151 year history," Manitoba Families Minister Rochelle Squires said at a news conference announcing the plan Monday.

Federal Families, Children and Social Development Minister Ahmed Hussen and Squires made the announcement at the YMCA-YWCA of Winnipeg in Westwood.

"This is the result of really hard work on both sides — the result of frank conversations, compromises, making sure that we're listening to each other, making sure we learned about the special circumstances of the early-learning and child-care sector in Manitoba," Hussen said.

Parents of young children, particularly women, have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, and now that much of the economy is reopening, they are facing "the impossible choice of either staying at home to take care of their kids or going back to work and paying very high child-care fees and fighting for those hard-to-get child-care spaces," he said.

The plan will cut costs for families by 50 per cent for children up to six years old in regulated child care by the end of the year, the two governments said in a news release.

It will also create another 23,000 full-time regulated care spaces by the end of the 2025-26 fiscal year, the news release said. An additional 1,700 extended-hour spaces will also be created, for parents needing child care in the evenings and on weekends.

Recruitment and wages

In order to entice people needed to staff those spaces, the funding will also be used to improve pay and training for early childhood educators. It sets a starting wage of \$25 an hour for certified level two early childhood educators.

"I'm talking about providing early childhood educators with good pay that is reflective of their training and their skills ... so that more people can choose to not only become early childhood educators but continue to be early childhood educators," Hussen said.

The province and the federal government are working on a separate, one-time agreement to improve recruitment and retention efforts, Squires said.

"We know that recruitment and retention in this sector is a challenge," she said.

University of Manitoba sociology professor Susan Prentice — who published a report through the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives last year calling on the province to make child care more affordable — praised the deal.

"I was delighted to see it," she said, adding that she hoped other provinces that haven't yet signed an agreement — like Alberta and Ontario — get on board.

One unique aspect of Manitoba's agreement, in comparison with other provinces, is the fact that it includes children up to six years old, rather than five years old.

"This might really lead to system transformation for the province. We'll have to see how this actually rolls out in practice but it's an enormously important first step," she said.

Feds favour non-profits

All currently regulated child-care operators — including not-for-profit, for-profit and public — are eligible to receive the federal funding.

"In the future," Hussen said, "the growth should be in the non-profit sector."

Kent Paterson, president and chief executive officer of the YMCA-YWCA of Winnipeg, spoke at the announcement on Monday and called the agreement "historic."

The YMCA-YWCA is the largest non-profit provider of child care in Canada, operating more than 90,000 spaces in more than 30 centres in and around Winnipeg, Paterson said.

"We could not do what we do without our incredible team of early childhood educators, who have been essential at all times, but particularly so throughout this pandemic."

The federal Liberals pledged to create a universal child-care system in their throne speech last September as a way to help more women return to and enter the workforce, after their numbers dropped during the pandemic.

With the deal between Manitoba and the federal government, nearly 50 per cent of Canadian families living in six provinces and the Yukon Territory are now covered by the federal program, Hussen said.

Nationally, the feds have committed to spending more than \$30 billion between now and 2026, and another \$9.2 billion every year after that.

The agreement comes nearly five months after the province unveiled Bill 47, which would make more child-care programs eligible to become licensed facilities, expand which providers can receive grants and extend a freeze on parent fees for another three years.

In April, the province released a report from the consulting firm KPMG that recommended a drastic reduction in the operating grants for licensed child-care centres, with a greater proportion of provincial funding going to cover the fees of lower-income families. Higher-income families would pay more out of their own pocket.

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