

More families eligible for child-care subsidy ^[1]

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Source: The Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 10 Aug 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Alberta is increasing the eligibility for child-care subsidies in the province up to \$90,000 per household from the previous \$75,000.

On Monday, July 26, Alberta's Children's Services Minister Rebecca Schultz announced more families will be eligible for a \$125-per-month subsidy to help offset the high costs of child care.

The move comes after a Friday announcement by the province that extended the existing Canada-Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, which will see the federal government provide \$290 million over four years to Alberta to improve access to child care.

As part of that funding, Schultz announced July 26 the funding would go toward increasing the income threshold for families to get government support for child-care or early-education programs, which will provide support for 12,000 more kids, with a price tag of \$45 million.

Schultz also announced some \$4.25 million will be put toward helping families who have kids in licensed preschools, as previously subsidies were only available for licensed daycare, family day home, or out-of-school care programs. Families will now receive \$125 per month.

Alberta is still negotiating with the federal government to secure money to implement the Canadian national child-care program announced recently in other provinces.

Schultz said they are still working on hammering out a long-term plan, adding the province is still working with the federal government to secure funding for the national affordable child-care program the federal Liberals promised in their 2021 budget.

"Negotiations are underway ... between our provincial government and the federal government on that longer-term investment," Schultz said.

Although the province is currently negotiating for the funding, the minister stopped short of promising a \$10-a-day program would be launched across Alberta. The federal government's goal is to bring child-care costs down across the country to \$10 a day, on average, within the next five years.

Schultz said the province is looking to address accessibility, affordability, and high-quality child care in Alberta, and affordability will be a key piece of the puzzle.

"We agree that affordability matters for some parents. We want to make sure that those spaces and those benefits go directly to those who need it the most, those lower- and middle-income families who really truly need those supports," Schultz said.

The previous provincial NDP government launched a \$25-a-day pilot program across Alberta. Schultz said to expand that program would have cost \$1.4 billion, and federal government investments "don't quite get us there."

"What we need to do is make sure we're making these investments in a way that addresses affordability, as well as quality, but also making sure that the parents who truly need those spaces have the ability to access them," Schultz said.

But Schultz said the funding from Ottawa is appreciated, and both the federal and provincial governments agree on the importance of access to high-quality, affordable child care.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberals will be investing \$30 billion over the next five years, with a minimum of \$9.2 billion per year after that. By the end of 2022, the new child-care system would reduce fees for parents with children in regulated child care by 50 per cent, on average.

So far both Nova Scotia and B.C. have signed on with the federal government for child-care funding, receiving \$605-million and \$3.2 billion, respectively.

"Every province has a slightly different child-care system that exists right now, and they also have parents making different choices from province to province, and that's where each province is negotiating a unique agreement with the federal government," Schultz said.

“But certainly, here in Alberta, we do need that flexibility to meet the unique needs of parents, and we also have the benefit of learning what worked and especially what didn’t work in a \$25-a-day pilot program that was running here in Alberta.”

What Alberta parents need, Schultz said, is flexible hours, overnight child care, access to spaces, and affordability.

“Not every parent needs nine-to-five, \$10-a-day daycare,” Schultz said.

Last spring the province launched a child-care consultation process where they heard from almost 10,000 parents, providers, educators, and other stakeholders about issues of affordability and the need to increase subsidies, said Rebecca Polak, provincial spokesperson for the ministry of children’s services.

Polak said the province is in the process of gathering Alberta-specific child-care data through the Supporting Alberta Working Parents advisory group, which includes representatives from civil society, business, municipal government, parent advocacy groups, and child-care organizations.

As the province moves forward with funding child care, Schultz said they need to be careful that, however they make their investments, they are not just picking and choosing parents or centres to access the supports.

Right now Alberta has a mixed market when it comes to child care, with more than 60 per cent of the operators running private businesses, while the remaining 40 per cent are not-for-profit centres.

The minister said she is optimistic a deal can be reached with the federal government, and said it is important for the provincial economic recovery to get parents, and women, back into the workforce.

The deal on Friday is a first step in negotiating with the federal government for child care, Schultz said, with \$56 million to support the recruitment and retention of an early-childhood workforce.

Ahmed Hussen, Minister of Families, Children, and Social Development, said in a statement that child care is not a luxury, it is a necessity.

“High-quality early-learning experiences are essential to the intellectual, emotional, and physical development of our children. Our government will continue to fight for families and children in Alberta, to ensure they have access to affordable, accessible, flexible, and inclusive child care. Because every child deserves the best possible start in life,” Hussen said.

Previously the provincial government had been cool on the federal child-care announcement, and Alberta’s Premier Jason Kenney said in April the plan would only support the “urban, nine-to-five, government- and union-run institutional daycare options.”

A report from Campaign 2000 showed one of the best ways Alberta can help lower child poverty is by providing affordable and accessible child care. The report noted child care can cost up to 67 per cent of a household’s monthly income, “making it extremely difficult for a family to afford nutritious food, housing, education, and other expenses.”

Region: Alberta ^[3]

Tags: subsidy ^[4]

affordability ^[5]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/21/08/more-families-eligible-child-care-subsidy> [2]

<https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2021/08/10/more-families-eligible-for-child-care-subsidy.html> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7859>

[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/subsidy> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/affordability>