

# Feds aiming to ease access for full parental leave, employment minister says <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

The minister in charge of Canada's federal social safety net for workers says the government is looking at removing rules that make it difficult for some to get their full parental leave as part of a review of the employment insurance system.

Employment Minister Carla Qualtrough says the issue is particularly acute for new mothers because of how the decades-old system has been designed.

A worker who pays into the system has to work a specific number of hours to qualify for benefits, and must do so for each new claim they make.

That means a new mother who has lost her job and files a claim for regular EI benefits has to work the necessary hours anew to get their full parental leave entitlements.

Qualtrough says not being able to stack unemployment and parental benefits into one EI claim creates an equity issue in the system, particularly for new mothers.

It's one of several issues she says is being looked at as part of a review of ways to modernize EI, a system whose shortcomings were exposed by COVID-19.

Before the pandemic, the criteria to qualify for EI maternity and parental leave benefits left out about one-third of new mothers.

Over the last year, many other mothers have found themselves without their full leave. Their circumstances are largely similar: They lost their job because of the pandemic, and couldn't find work to get the required hours because of COVID-19 restrictions and closures.

Qualtrough said she's looking for ways to make the system less clunky to eliminate inequities.

"Figuring that out would be a massive step forward in terms of making EI accessible for so many more people and, actually, people being able to access their maximum entitlements," Qualtrough said in a wide-ranging end-of-year interview with The Canadian Press.

"It's something I'm super keen to figure out how to address. I'm not quite sure yet how it will be addressed or in what order we're going to tackle these things, I'm working on that, but it's definitely top of mind."

Revamping the EI system is one of the biggest issues Qualtrough is being asked to tackle in the coming year. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's marching orders to Qualtrough are that she come up with a plan and start overhauling the system starting in the summer of 2022.

Qualtrough is also being asked to ensure the revamped system covers gig and cultural workers, includes a 26-week benefit for self-employed Canadians, a new 15-week benefit for adoptive parents, and extra help for older workers who lose a job and need more time to find a new position.

Qualtrough said she's confident she'll meet the timelines, but is also realistic that the system can't change overnight: Along with time to institute new rules and benefits, the government is going to have to update the technology underpinning EI, parts of which run on code from the 1960s.

It's why Qualtrough is also keeping an eye on what happens to the labour market in the run up to September 2022. By then, temporary measures setting a \$300-a-week floor on benefits and easier access into the system are set to expire.

Questions about what to do post-September are part of federal consultations on EI to see if the temporary measures may need to be extended or become permanent while broader changes make their way through the legislative process.

In the meantime, the conversation about the future of EI has changed with a shifting labour market marked by widespread reports of labour shortages.

Businesses are nervous that a modernized system may disincentivize work, adding a layer of concern to any possible changes to EI that Qualtrough said wasn't part of talks a few months ago.

"Businesses are feeling like they can't grow because of a lack of people and I want to talk to them about how to support people who aren't working," she said. "It's a really interesting tension I would say that wasn't there six months ago."

Qualtrough said potential reforms could include more options for skills training and development inside the EI system that could merge what she said were "these two complicated realities that Canadians and businesses are facing."

**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** parental leave <sup>[4]</sup>

maternity and paternity leave <sup>[5]</sup>

Women <sup>[6]</sup>

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