

Manitoba daycare plan hinges on wage issues: advocates ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

OTTAWA — Manitoba is pledging revolutionary improvements to daycare access, though advocates worry a slow increase to front-line wages will thwart the rollout of affordable spots.

"They have still have not fully reckoned with the absolute, crucial role of paying the wages that are required," said University of Manitoba Prof. Susan Prentice, one of Canada's leading child care experts.

On Tuesday, the Manitoba government released the child care agreement it signed with Ottawa in August, which explains how the province will implement the Trudeau government's \$30-billion pledge for \$10-a-day daycare across Canada.

Manitoba should reach that goal by March 2023, far ahead of most provinces.

The agreement spells out funding timelines and what targets each government must meet in order to keep the funds flowing. It touches on everything from building daycares, to creating training programs for future staff, to boosting wages and quality standards.

Yet, the plan also seems to delay a pledge to boost the average pay for certain jobs to \$25 per hour until the third year of the agreement.

Roughly 10 per cent of the first two years of funding goes toward wage increases. That's despite most jobs not seeing a substantial increase in pay since 2016. Manitoba has a cap on parent fees, but the sector argues constrained provincial funding makes it impossible to boost salaries.

As a result, expensive commercially run spaces are easier to find than cheaper non-profit ones, particularly in poorer areas.

"Even though Manitoba is the second most affordable province (after) Quebec, for very low-income families, it's been hell," Prentice said.

Hundreds of staff have left daycares to earn more in schools as educational assistants.

Early childhood educators require post-secondary education, and the mean hourly wage ranges from \$19.77 to \$24.81 in Manitoba for non-director roles. The agreement would set a minimum wage for those positions ranging from \$20.90 to \$25.84 starting next March.

Meanwhile, CCAs, who require a few weeks of training, could be paid as low as \$12.25 to plan activities, change diapers and prepare meals.

"It's clearly profoundly inadequate (and) very short-sighted," Prentice said, arguing it dates to undervaluing the labour of a primarily female workforce.

The Families Department said in a statement it's hoping to raise wages sooner with more federal help.

"Manitoba is wrapping up negotiations with Canada for a separate one-time Early Childhood Workforce Funding allocation, that will provide the (child care) sector with recruitment incentives and financial benefits to retain staff" until it can implement its wage targets.

Ottawa projects its agreement will have Manitoba hire between 4,600 to 5,750 specialized workers (not including on First Nations reserves, which fall under a separate plan). Yet, the Manitoba Child Care Association argues that expansion will be impossible unless current wages are substantially increased.

"I worry about expanding a system that is fragile," said executive director Jodie Kehl, whose group represents more than 4,000 daycare workers. "We've got a lot of catch-up to do here."

She noted under the new agreement, the director of a daycare with 151 to 200 spaces would be making \$67,000 per year, a salary far lower than equivalent roles in schools.

"It (should) not just be the lowest of the low meeting an already too low bar; it's about raising the bar higher for the entire sector," Kehl said.

The NDP had similar concerns, particularly about "pitiful wages" for college-educated workers.

"You can make more money working at Sobeys," said Notre Dame MLA Malaya Marcelino. "They have to increase those wages, like

yesterday. So we can even get the ball rolling."

Many parts of the deal impressed her, but Marcelino is cautious the Tory government will focus on non-profit spaces.

Months before signing Ottawa's deal, the PC government passed legislation that allows more of a role for the commercial sector, and commissioned consultants who suggested the cap be raised for higher-income parents.

"It's a complete 180 (degrees) from what we were doing in the spring," she said. "With the PCs at the helm of this plan, we have trust issues."

She worried the province will use federal funds to replace its own spending on child care instead of sharing enough costs, yet Prentice noted fairly stringent reporting requirements, and limits to how much untapped money can be carried into subsequent years.

Meanwhile, child care groups are hoping for more specificity around targets, with the agreement including the term "to be determined" 54 times.

A January 2016 report from the former NDP government's child care commission pointed to issues in collecting data pertaining to the sector, and the Manitoba government said acknowledged "system limitations" will take time to overcome.

"It's quite underdeveloped for an action plan. But most of the early indications are, in general, positive," Prentice said.

Region: Manitoba ^[3]

Tags: federal agreement ^[4]

workforce ^[5]

wages ^[6]

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