

Manitoba triples number of subsidized child-care spots, increases eligibility ^[1]

Author: Da Silva, Danielle

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EXCERPTS

Daycare costs for thousands of families will drop early next week as the provincial government expands its Manitoba Child Care Subsidy Program to cover nearly half of the province's regulated spots.

Beginning Sunday, an estimated 12,000 more daycare spaces will qualify for partial or full subsidies, Premier Heather Stefanson said during a joint press conference with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau Thursday.

The pair was also joined by federal Minister of Families, Children and Social Development Karina Gould, federal Northern Affairs Minister Dan Vandal and Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning Minister Wayne Ewasko.

Just 6,000 families in Manitoba currently receive subsidies for child care, representing about 16 per cent of the 38,000 regulated spots in the province.

"As we've seen over the course of the pandemic, access to child care is absolutely vital to ensuring women and families can continue to work and provide critical services to Manitobans," Stefanson said.

Net income thresholds to qualify for the subsidy program will be increased by approximately 45 per cent. Income thresholds have not changed since 2013 and have not kept up with minimum-wage increases.

Households with a net income of \$37,116 could qualify for a full subsidy while households with a net income of \$82,877 could qualify for a partial subsidy. The change is estimated to save families an average of about 30 per cent in out-of-pocket child-care fees.

The federal government provided \$64.5 million through the Canada-Manitoba Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care agreement to supplement the new eligibility criteria.

Overall funding for the program will increase to \$82.7 million annually.

Manitoba signed on to the agreement last August; it came with \$1.2 billion in federal cash over five years. Under the agreement, the province has committed to reducing child-care fees by 50 per cent by the end of the year and reaching an average \$10 out-of-pocket fee per day by March 2023.

"We know that costs are significant around the country because of this pandemic, that's where this boost will help them with everything from groceries to gas to what they need to get through winter at a time that is really challenging," Trudeau said via a virtual connection from Ottawa.

In an interview with the Free Press, Gould said discussions are ongoing between the two governments on a renewed minimum-wage grid for early childhood educators.

"It is about ensuring that we are providing fair wages, because they do really difficult and hard work, and we entrust them with our kids and so we need to pay them adequately," Gould said.

Details are expected to be made public soon and will include a one-time funding boost to support recruitment and retention in the sector to support the addition of new child-care spots.

"We haven't, as a society, placed value on child care like we need to," Gould said. "A lot of people, women in particular, have known and have been advocating for a system like the one that we're bringing in today for over 50 years in Canada."

University of Manitoba sociology professor Susan Prentice said expanding subsidies for child care will offer relief to some families but is only a "stop gap" solution to larger, systemic issues in the child-care sector.

"This will help some low-income parents... but I want to be clear, the price of child care in Manitoba has not changed," said Prentice, a public policy researcher and leading expert on child care.

"We need to rethink what it means to try to deliver a 21st century child-care system for Manitoba."

Prentice said she was alarmed to see the government increase the reliance on subsidies while offering few specifics when it comes to overall program funding and wages.

"It's time to reform the policy architecture for child care," Prentice said. "It's not just enough to layer a small change on top of a shaky foundation. It's time to redefine child care so it's widely accessible and high quality for all the families that want to use it."

And as the government begins to implement plans to improve quality and affordability, Prentice said the devil will be in the details.

"This first step is creating an illusion of more affordability without really making more affordability," she said. "I think the fact that there's not a whole budget review happening bodes very badly for efficiency and effectiveness, and making good on the promises to families."

Meanwhile, Manitoba Child Care Association executive director Jodie Kehl said a comprehensive workforce strategy will be essential to the expanded delivery of child care in the province.

The sector is currently in distress due to critical staff shortages and needs immediate support to respond to the pandemic.

"Early childhood educators and home-based providers are the foundation (on) which our system exists," Kehl said. "At the heart of high-quality child care is educated and well-remunerated early childhood educators.

"We've continued to say for the last 24 months, that thanks to child care, Manitoba works."

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