

Mothers share hopes for childcare improvements ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ashley Tulugak and Kaylie Kattegatsiak are among many Nunavummiut who have witnessed daycares struggle to stay open and also among those who hold out hope that a recent federal government announcement of \$66 million over five years will truly make a difference.

Kattegatsiak, a resident of Chesterfield Inlet, said she has been fortunate to have a relative move in with her family to look after her two toddlers, allowing her to become employed again. The local daycare closed a few months ago due to a shortage of staff, she said.

"I am thrilled," she said of the aid from Ottawa that will subsidize Nunavut daycares. The government says the extra money will cut childcare fees in half by the end of this year and reduce costs to \$10 a day, on average, by March 2024 at publicly-licensed facilities.

It will also result in higher wages for childcare employees.

"Yes, it will interest people to apply for the positions and catch some attention, which will help many parents to be able to go to work," Kattegatsiak said, adding that she would also like to see the territorial government oversee daycare staffing instead of a local board of directors. "I think it would work better instead of the organization working by itself."

In Rankin Inlet, Tulugak said this development comes too late for her family as her two children are now too old for daycare, but she's pleased with the news anyway.

"We have lots of relatives and friends who'll benefit from this, and I'm happy for them," she said. "Change in the daycare system was desperately needed for a long time and it was next to impossible to make change. To see a new system come through that offers more support for daycares, workers and more spots is hopeful. I'm interested to learn more of the plans as it rolls out. More training and facilities for daycares are definitely needed. Higher wages for the workers would help keep staff as well."

Tulugak was paying \$10,400 per child when she made use of a local daycare, where she was a board member. However, she described the system as "dysfunctional" and keeping the daycare operational proved to be a strain. She decided to withdraw her children and take two years of leave without pay to ensure that they received quality care. Nevertheless, she still had to take on different jobs from home to help cover various expenses.

"There are so many parents who struggled with childcare – some who stuck it out, stayed home, found other options or moved away. That says so much of how badly change was needed for the better. Children are the most vulnerable and it's up to adults to make things better for them," said Tulugak. "Now, with the plan of early childhood care and learning being generously supported (through the new federal funds), I'm so hopeful for the future for precious babies and children in Nunavut, they totally deserve it. We're tight-knit communities. These babies and children are people we deeply care about, if they're not our children, they're our nieces, nephews, cousins, friends, grandchildren. I can't wait to see the positive change from improvements made to the childcare system."

In Kinngait, Kootoo Toonoo, who has managed a daycare for more than 32 years, said she's lucky to have three long-term staff as she's watched many others quit after paydays.

She refuses to get excited at the prospect of being able to offer a higher rate of pay or any other perks until the money from the Government of Canada actually flows into her facility.

"We will see when it comes out," she said.

'Building the system'

Federal Minister of Families, Children and Social Development Karina Gould, who hailed the new daycare funds in a virtual news conference with Premier P.J. Akeegok, Education Minister Pamela Gross and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Jan. 24, said communities with insufficient buildings to host daycares should consult with the Government of Nunavut because the federal funding includes support for existing infrastructure.

"As Minister Gross was mentioning, it's also about building new infrastructure and thinking about childcare right from the get-go, so

whether it's a new school being built or a community centre, building in childcare into that new infrastructure will enable growth in the sector, in particular for communities that don't have childcare already," said Gould.

The agreement includes 238 new childcare spaces in Nunavut by March 2026.

Asked why the cost-cutting and growth targets are set years into the future, Gould replied that meeting the infrastructure needs and raising wages will take time.

"It's really about building the system while also reducing fees," she said.

Overall, Gould said she's "really excited" about the opportunities that this development will present.

"We heard the premier speak, I think very eloquently, about the importance of a good start in life and also the fact that the Government of Nunavut will be building in culturally-relevant, language-specific programming that I think will be really important for the healthy development of children in Nunavut," she said.

Region: Nunavut ^[3]

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