

Childcare will be cheaper, but space is the next hurdle ^[1]

As federal funding to reduce NWT childcare costs begins to roll in, there are questions about how another basic requirement will be funded: the space to offer the service.

Author: Williams, Ollie

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EXCERPTS

While Ottawa promises the cost of childcare in the territory will be halved this year, virtually none of a \$51-million package trumpeted twice in the past few months appears available to spend on physical infrastructure.

Some NWT communities don't have appropriate spaces, or enough space, to offer childcare services required by families.

"This agreement is only as good as the space available for the programming and we still have many communities without quality childcare," Frame Lake MLA Kevin O'Reilly said in the legislature last week.

Asked by Cabin Radio how much of the recently announced funding would be available for new or renovated buildings, Karina Gould – the federal minister responsible for early learning and childcare – said she had no "exact number," adding: "This is a conversation that will be ongoing."

Questioned by O'Reilly in the legislature, NWT education minister RJ Simpson said two agreements with Ottawa each provided "just over \$100,000 for infrastructure" alongside \$300,000 in health and safety funding that can be used for building upgrades. The territory also has \$1 million of its own cash dedicated to childcare infrastructure annually.

"We do provide supports for infrastructure," Simpson said. "We've also looked at all of our programs and are determining if there's a need to have more infrastructure funding – and how we might be able to repurpose some of the current funding that we have towards that – given we now have a large influx of money from the federal government."

Money will be critical to the NWT's ambition of creating 300 new childcare spaces across the territory over the next five years.

"In the larger communities, it may be possible to retool existing spaces but in smaller communities, surplus or any space may be lacking," O'Reilly said last week.

Simpson, responding, said requests for infrastructure cash from smaller communities were being prioritized.

"It's important to note that not all small communities need childcare facilities. In some communities, there are no children under the age of five. And in some communities, there are so few children that they would prefer to be with family," the minister said.

"I don't think we're ever going to have a scenario in the territory where every single community has a licensed childcare centre. There are going to be different options in different communities.

"But we are prioritizing those small communities that don't have childcare and we're going to work with the Indigenous governments and NGOs who might be interested in operating childcare facilities."

Below, read a transcript of our interview with federal minister Karina Gould regarding funding for childcare in the NWT

Ollie Williams: The NWT education minister places a lot of emphasis on physical infrastructure for childcare. How is the federal government helping make that a reality?

Karina Gould: Well, it's certainly part of our support that we're providing to the territorial government. I think what was important about today's announcement, though, was the fact of the fee reduction that was announced retroactive to January of this year. This is 10 months ahead of schedule, which is quite impressive, I think, from the territorial government. We only signed this agreement in December and they've already made quite a tangible impact. But we do recognize that infrastructure in the North is certainly a challenge. And that's something that we continue to have conversations about.

A fee reduction doesn't help if there is no childcare to purchase. How much of the money the federal government has provided is going toward infrastructure?

I don't have the exact number in front of me. But as you know, with regards to the Canada-wide early learning and childcare agreement, we

have a number of objectives in place. The first one is the fee reduction, which we announced today [editor's note: the reduction was first announced in December 2021], which, quite frankly, is really good news. For families with children in licensed care, it's going to make a really important difference for their families' finances going all the way back to January of this year. And it's well over \$4,000, on average, for a family for a year. That's huge.

And the second one is with regards to space creation. And so the Northwest Territories has committed to building 300 new spaces over the next five years. But we also know that this is a conversation that will be ongoing, and part of it will be with regards to the ability to just build more infrastructure. Now, part of that conversation is in the childcare space, part of it is within the infrastructure and community space as well, looking at where there are opportunities to place childcare. I know that the Northwest Territories is looking at the school system. So there's an opportunity there. But then there are also community centres and rec centres, and different ideas that both the territorial government and the federal government are discussing together.

Once you have those spaces, you need teachers and early childhood educators to be able to provide that care. It's both a question of physical infrastructure and a question of talent and human resources. And the federal government is working very collaboratively with the Government of the Northwest Territories to address all of those issues.

This probably isn't the same situation that many southern provinces face. The NWT has a lot of work to do to get to a basic foundational level where people can access childcare. Is there a recognition that an agreement working toward \$10-a-day childcare needs to be unique in the NWT and address the broader problems?

Absolutely. And I would say each agreement that we've signed, whether it's with the Northwest Territories or whether it's with Nova Scotia, has been unique. We have these broad, overarching objectives because we want to ensure that every child and every family in Canada has access to the same level of quality and access of services. But we also recognize that each province, each territory faces their own unique circumstances. Certainly in the North, the question of infrastructure and the question of attraction and retention of the workforce are questions that, while really every province and territory faces them to a certain extent, they are particularly acute in the North.

What level of oversight will the federal government retain over how this rolls out? This is tens of millions of dollars being invested.

We've worked very closely with our partners in the territorial government as they've developed their action plan, which is now available on the Government of Canada's website. So any resident can look at it and see for themselves what the Northwest Territories government has committed to do with these funds. And then we also require that each province and territory that signs on to this agreement provide pretty robust data reporting back to us. We're establishing an implementation committee to ensure that the federal and territorial governments continue to work collaboratively but also have a forum to address any issues or challenges that arise and figure out how we can work to support the territorial government to address them. And the territorial government has an action plan that outlines their objectives and when and how they plan to meet them. We'll be following up on that.

What, if any mechanism exists for the involvement of Indigenous governments and communities in this?

Well, it's an important question. There is also an Indigenous early learning and childcare initiative that is specific to Indigenous communities right across the country. We've signed agreements with the Métis, with Inuit and with the Assembly of First Nations. They have responsibility in terms of delivering distinctions-based childcare in their communities, and that is Indigenous-led and supported by the federal government. However, we expect that each agreement we sign with a province or territory takes into account the needs of Indigenous communities within their jurisdiction. And it's something that each province and territory has committed to, within the agreement signed at the federal level.

As the territory develops its early learning and childcare system over the coming years, we expect there will be significant involvement from Indigenous communities and that it will be grounded in Indigenous culture and language, and supportive of the unique needs of Indigenous children and families across the territory.

Region: Northwest Territories [3]

Tags: \$10 a day [4]

system building [5]

fee reduction [6]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/22/03/childcare-will-be-cheaper-space-next-hurdle> [2]

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[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/10-a-day-child-care> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9240> [6]

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