

As the St. John's region childcare crisis worsens, many are wondering, 'how are people supposed to afford to have children if they can't work?' ^[1]

Government announces more supports, but some families and operators say it's not nearly soon enough to solve the immediate problems

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EXCERPTS

ST. JOHN'S, N.L. — Karyn Laporte is due back to work from maternity leave in less than a month, but instead of soaking up the last few weeks of snuggles, she's desperately seeking someone to look after her babies.

Laporte, who is a nurse, said she put her twins, Clifford and Eloise Laporte, on daycare waitlists as soon as they were born.

"We've had some daycares say to us, 'You know, you really should have called when you found out you were pregnant.' How do you know, right? You're not thinking about those things when you're three months pregnant."

She said regulated daycares are telling her she'd have to wait until spring of next year before a spot opens up. She hasn't been able to find a dayhome either, and both she and her husband are from rural Newfoundland and have no one in the city to help with childcare.

She's not alone.

St. John's resident Rebecca Aylward told SaltWire Network she has seven-month old twins for whom she hasn't been able to find care. She said her husband, a teacher, will have to leave work to care for their children when her maternity leave is over.

"It's really ridiculous the province will lose a wonderful teacher because of this shortage," she said.

"We've had some daycares say to us, 'You know, you really should have called when you found out you were pregnant.'"

— Karyn Laporte

Brittany Smart is a human resources manager with two children.

She had an unregulated dayhome lined up for her son, but when the province lowered the cost for regulated daycare to \$15 a day in January, the dayhome closed — two months before she was due back to work.

She's now working from home, and has a babysitter from 9 a.m. until noon each day so she can get some work done. She said her employer has, thankfully, been understanding.

"This has been incredibly challenging for our family, my career, my mental health and my children. I am lucky to have some sort of arrangement for the time being, but I know many aren't as lucky."

A nurse practitioner who asked to remain unnamed said she had to take an unpaid leave of absence from work because she can't find childcare, and her maternity leave ran out.

"The childcare provider shortage is indirectly impacting the health-care crisis. I know many nurses that are in a similar boat and currently have no childcare options available, and will be unable to return to work on time," she said.

Parents may have to quit jobs

Flatrock resident Devin Norman told SaltWire Network the one small street he lives on in Flatrock has at least four babies under age one who currently don't have childcare for when their mothers' maternity leave ends.

Norman wrote a letter to Education Minister Tom Osborne, which he shared with SaltWire Network.

"If we don't get 'lucky' within the coming months, either myself or my partner are looking at the very real possibility of having to give up our

full-time permanent jobs to care for our child,” he wrote.

He said social media groups formed to help families find childcare are an indication of how desperate people have become.

He pointed to a post in one group in which someone said they might be opening a dayhome in the Mount Pearl area, and within an hour the post had more than 150 replies from parents in the area looking for childcare.

SaltWire Network spoke with a single mother of three who didn’t want to be named, but she said she’s due to return to work in April and she has no one to care for her one-year-old.

“I don’t have a choice to not work and stay home. I’m the only income in the household and it’s hard enough on maternity benefits. ... If I am unable to find care for my child in April, I will be forced to go on social assistance because my maternity benefits will be over.”

Another woman told SaltWire Network she can afford to pay more than \$15 per day for childcare, “but we can’t find anyone to take our money.”

Since she returned to work at the end of January, her mother-in-law has been travelling to St. John’s from rural Newfoundland on two-week rotations to care for their child.

She said she already took seven days off work, and will have to take another five next week because they still haven’t found childcare.

“If we can’t secure childcare soon, my husband is going to have to quit his job and find part-time evening (or) weekend work. In a province that already has a high living cost, how are people supposed to afford to have children if they can’t work?”

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‘Emotions are high’

Jennifer Quilty is a licensee who operates Leaps and Bounds daycare, and Apples to Zebras daycare.

“The emotions are high,” she said.

“We have parents crying on the phone, going, ‘I can’t get to work, I can’t move on in my career.’ You shouldn’t have to choose between family and childcare and your career.”

Like the parents SaltWire Network spoke with, Quilty also called the situation a crisis.

“I recently had a couple (write to say), ‘Hi, we just got married, and we plan on having children, can I put my two children on your waitlist for 2024?’ And I’m like, ‘Wow, we need 10 fingers and toes first.’”

Quilty said the move to \$15 a day childcare in January increased demand.

To that end, she said she’s been trying to build a toddler room since June of last year, and government processes are slowing down the progress. She said she finally received the permit to do the work on the building in December, and only got it inspected this week.

“(Government is) looking at moving ahead to a pre-K program, but they need to figure out, what are you going to do with all the infants?” Quilty asked.

Pre-K begins September

On Wednesday, March 9, representatives from the federal and provincial governments announced more initiatives as part of the \$347-million Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Early Learning and Child Care Agreements previously announced in summer 2021.

A pre-kindergarten pilot program will begin in September this year. By 2025-2026 the program is expected to be fully implemented, creating about 3,100 regulated spaces for four-year-olds, thereby opening up existing spaces for younger children.

Several other initiatives were announced “to encourage the creation of regulated childcare spaces by not-for-profit groups, municipalities and family home-based regulated services, to increase wages for early childhood educators and to grow the ECE workforce,” according to a news release.

This includes increases to existing grants, providing more funding to Family and Child Care Connections to increase the number of home-based operations, introducing a wage grid for ECEs that is expected to increase their wages and adding about 700 additional seats in post-secondary early learning and childcare programs.

“As a result of these measures, by 2025-2026 the province aims to add approximately 5,800 additional regulated childcare spots and to increase the percentage of fully certified ECEs working in the sector to at least 60 per cent,” reads the news release.

Those changes will not immediately help many of the families SaltWire Network spoke with on Wednesday to get childcare next month.

‘We have to start somewhere’

“It’d be great if we could make this all happen tomorrow, and snap our fingers and it would just be all fixed,” said Premier Andrew Furey.

"But we have to start somewhere. We're starting here, and we're recognizing that we are trying to move in parallel streams — pulling two different levers at the same time, which is increasing affordability while increasing capacity, and I think an announcement like today gets us closer to where we all want to be."

"It'd be great if we could make this all happen tomorrow, and snap our fingers and it would just be all fixed."

— Andrew Furey

Education Minister Tom Osborne said it's easier to make childcare more affordable than it is to make it more accessible.

"I can't look at somebody and point my finger and say, 'You're going to be an ECE tomorrow, come to work.' ECEs need to be trained, but we have identified a large roster of former ECEs who are very qualified, who we are saddened to see had left the sector because of low wages, who we hope to attract back to the sector based on increased wages," he said.

"There's no quick fix to accessibility, but we did not want to penalize parents who had early learning spaces by keeping the prices higher in order to avoid creating greater demand. Those individuals deserve to have more cost-effective early learning while we work on the accessibility piece."

Region: Newfoundland ^[3]

Tags: work life balance ^[4]

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