

B.C. says focus on more than just low fees for universal child-care programs ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It was almost 40 years ago that Sharon Gregson says she became an advocate for child care out of necessity.

The spokeswoman for \$10-a-day child care at the Coalition of Child Care Advocates for British Columbia said she is celebrating this week after Ontario became the final province to sign on to the federal government's national daycare plan, which promises \$30 billion in new spending over five years.

Gregson said she was 22 years old, raising two young children on her own and attending post-secondary classes when she realized she couldn't find quality child care and couldn't afford it even if she did find it.

"I instantly became an advocate because I recognized that politicians seemed blind to this gender equity issue," said Gregson in an interview. "It's a children's rights issue and I spoke up as a young parent."

Gregson, 59, said she's now advocating for quality child care for her grandson.

B.C. was the first province to sign on to the federal government's national child-care program last July. Under the agreement, Ottawa promised \$3.2 billion to add 30,000 regulated care spaces by the end of 2026 and 40,000 by the end of 2028.

Quebec implemented its own universal child-care program in 1997 and has more than 200,000 children in subsidized child care. The Quebec government announced last October it would spend an additional \$3 billion to create another 37,000 daycare spaces.

Gregson's advice to other provinces and territories embarking on child-care programs is to focus on building a complete system, one that looks beyond low fees for parents.

"With (Premier) Doug Ford in Ontario just signing, they have a lot of work to do, not just with making a difference on the ground for families but actually putting systems in place that support building the infrastructure around child care and not having it just be ad hoc," she said.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Ford signed a \$10.2-billion, five-year child-care deal Monday to bring fees down to an average of \$10 a day by the end of 2026.

B.C. Premier John Horgan made universal \$10-a-day child care a key election promise in 2017 when his New Democrats formed a minority government.

B.C. launched its child-care program in 2018 and expects to have about 12,500 licensed, \$10-a-day child-care spaces operating by the end of the year, said Gregson, who estimated the province has about 125,000 children in daycares.

The B.C. government said earlier this year when it tabled its budget that most families can expect to have their fees down to \$20 a day by the end of the year.

"We are well on our way," Gregson said. "That's not to say there isn't a lot of work to do."

The deal between Ontario and the federal government marked a milestone for universal child care across Canada, said Katrina Chen, B.C.'s minister of state responsible for child care.

"It's exciting news for Canadian families," said Chen in an interview. "It's great to see all the provinces on board. It's totally doable. It's an exciting time for all Canadian families, especially B.C. families."

Chen said B.C. wants to make child care a core service people come to count on like public education and health care.

"You really need a comprehensive approach to make sure you build a new social program to make this work for everybody," she said.

"Every province has different opportunities and challenges. I know some provinces are only focusing on affordability, lowering the cost. Some provinces may be focused on creating spaces."

B.C.'s plan is focused on child care that is affordable, accessible, inclusive and high quality, Chen said.

Gregson said it's taken more than 50 years since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada first said there should be a national daycare plan, but the goal is now within reach.

"It is not in any way extreme to say this is historic," she said. "This has never happened before. This is a turning moment for child care, for future generations not to have the same chaos in their lives when they have children as we have had in the past."

Region: British Columbia ^[3]

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