

Lack of child care is driving these families on Newfoundland's south coast to the brink ^[1]

With few options, some families face huge bills and near-impossible choices

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EXCERPTS

The three clear choices facing Danielle Cousins and her children are near impossible: sell her house on Newfoundland's south coast, quit her job, or pay \$30,000 a year for full-time care for her children in her community.

Each is so unpalatable that Cousins is ready to take a dramatic step to take matters into her own hands: change her career completely and start her very own child-care centre — which would be the only one in her region.

"People who are essential to our community are considering packing up and leaving and moving to another area because child care is a non-negotiable," she said. "Somebody has to look after these guys. So it's absolutely a necessity that they need to pursue in order to make a life."

Her new dream, however, is stuck on the horizon, due to regulations that require licensed child-care operators employ an administrator with a Level 2 early childhood education credential.

That credential is years away, unless she can convince someone who already has it to move to the area. So her proposed centre is on pause, and other families are left searching for options in the Bay d'Espoir area.

"I have a colleague now who is in a predicament," said Norman Penton, who himself is a new father in St. Alban's. "Her partner was the primary child care during the day, and with him now finding work ... proverbial rock and a hard place.

"Either you get someone who may or may not be suitable or you have to leave your own position and possibly leave the town. Which is where we were."

The lack of child-care services in the region is pushing families to the brink of the unthinkable — making dramatic choices between their careers and their families.

"One of the really scary things that I heard someone say — someone who's facing the same challenges — is that, 'Well, that was the deciding factor. He's going to be our only [child] because we can't find someone to look after another,'" Cousins said.

No centre for miles

Bay d'Espoir has about 2,000 people, but the closest child-care centre for Cousins and Penton is in Harbour Breton, about an hour's drive away.

Cousins said it might make more sense just to pack up and move, because her work as a principal at a school in the region is midway between the two areas — but they don't want to leave their new house.

And, besides, she believes Bay d'Espoir can't afford for all young families to move away.

And while she said she has heard from government representatives that they may be able to ease requirements in special situations, it's still not clear whether she will be able to open her dream child-care centre in time for her own two children to take advantage of it.

"We've got interested people, people who are willing to support us, people who are in the exact same boat that I am," she said. "All of those people are likely going to be returning to work within the next few months. So it is something that needs to be addressed and it is something that needs to be addressed within a reasonable timeframe."

Cousins is preparing to go back to work in September, which means she'll have to hire a babysitter to watch her two children. She says she'll also have to hire an accountant to handle the paperwork and logistics, and the total bills will come at an estimated \$30,000.

That's because — even if she has summers off as a K-12 educator — she's anticipating paying minimum wage and providing some extra salary in lieu of vacation time.

"Right now, with the cost of everything increasing ... that is slowly becoming unaffordable to us," she said. "I don't know how we're going to swing it."

"That's a minimum-wage income. That's your average sort of job, I would think."

If she could find a registered child-care space for her two children, and avail of the government subsidies that cap the price for parents at \$15 dollars per day, her costs would drop to about \$7,800 a year.

When \$10 a day child care is introduced, it will be even lower.

Too much to chance

Penton said a chance meeting on the street secured his family child care — but not everyone is so lucky.

"We were very fortunate to get her because we trust her. And I believe she adores our little boy," he said.

But if he and his wife, Leah, wanted to have another child, they'd be searching for options again. And he knows that for any newcomers into a community, having to rely on social connections to find child care is a scary prospect.

Before he and his partner secured a spot, they were thinking about leaving themselves.

"We were stuck. And then, you know, your mind all of a sudden goes down that path: 'Well, I guess we got to leave. We don't have family here. We're not from here.'

"And there's a number of young professionals who are either have just started a family or are going to, planning to start a family who are in the same boat that we were."

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