

Sask. aims to license child care homes to fill labour gap ^[1]

Relatively few unregulated child care spaces have been licensed, despite a range of incentives and the promise of big refunds for parents.

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EXCERPTS

Saskatchewan wants to bring unlicensed child care providers into the fold as part of a plan to more than double the number spaces in the next four years. However, only 24 homes have so far made the switch to the licensed sector.

Officials hope that will change as the landmark federal-provincial strategy picks up steam.

"I think this is a real opportunity to bring those providers... to get into the licensed sector, to really provide that curriculum and provide that service," federal Families Minister Karina Gould said in an interview last week.

In August 2021 the federal government pledged \$1.1 billion to reduce average child care costs in Saskatchewan to \$10 a day and create thousands of new spaces by the 2025-26 fiscal year, part of a Canada-wide child care strategy that was a central plank of the 2021 federal budget.

Part of the plan includes halving child care costs for kids aged six and younger in Saskatchewan by the end of the year, which the province has accomplished through generous refunds to parents with kids in licensed homes.

However, a significant — but unknown — number of families have children receiving care in the unlicensed sector. Gould says it's the result of long wait times to get regulated spaces.

The province sees licensing those spaces as killing two birds with one stone: parents at those homes get cheaper child care, and it helps the province achieve a daunting goal of creating 28,000 new spaces under its agreement with the federal government by the end of the 2025-26 fiscal year.

"One of the reasons we're looking to target those people is we know they're already providing a service to families," said Samantha Ecarnot, the provincial Ministry of Education's director of child care operations. "So if we can help make life more affordable for those Saskatchewan families as well, that's really important for us."

The province has introduced financial incentives for unregulated homes to make the switch. There's a start-up grant; another grant to assist with costs that may arise from a mandatory fire inspection; grants for buying appropriate materials and an ongoing fund for providing nutritious food.

So far, only 24 homes have been licensed under those programs, but the ministry is in talks with about 70 more, Ecarnot said. Many simply may not be aware of the opportunities, she added.

"It's difficult for me to speak to why somebody may or may not come into the licensed fold at this point."

Sue Delanoy, a long-time child care advocate, said she believes a broader labour strategy is needed to meet the demand for spaces.

Ecarnot said there are currently about 16,000 licensed spaces in child care centres and about 2,400 regulated spaces in homes.

"It's not that it's not a good idea to try and license some of the unlicensed providers ... but I think the majority of the work needs to be coming up with a labour force strategy," Delanoy said.

Unlicensed spaces are an important but limited solution to the labour gap, which she sees as the key barrier to achieving the government's goals, she added.

"I'm not saying family child care isn't great. It can be and it might be. But it's not usually a long-term solution. Lots of people who (offer) care in their homes only do it for a short time," said Delanoy, who ran such a space herself 30 years ago.

Gould said she hopes the strategy will lead to more people treating child care as a profession, and hopes wage grids the provinces and territories are mandated to create under the agreement will help boost wages in the sector to draw more workers.

"In many cases, the wages don't match the skills and the education required to be an early childhood educator," Gould said.

Region: Saskatchewan [3]

Tags: wage gap [4]

unlicensed child care [5]

early childhood workforce [6]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/unlicensed-child-care> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/early-childhood-workforce>