

N.W.T. child care might be cheaper but wait lists, staff shortages persist^[1]

Facing long wait lists, advocates say child care plan should prioritize access over affordability

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EXCERPTS

Child care wait lists are getting longer in the Northwest Territories and daycares are struggling to retain staff who face burnout and wages that aren't competitive with other northern employers.

That's according to members of the NWT Early Childhood Association and advocates like Ryan Fequet, president of the board of the Yellowknife Daycare Association, who say the recent child care subsidy doesn't address staffing issues.

When much of the world went into lockdown in 2020, child care providers remained open because their services are the "foundation of our community," Fequet said.

Without them, "nothing else works," Fequet said.

Last month, N.W.T. Education Minister R.J. Simpson said his department would re-evaluate the way child care subsidies are applied in the Northwest Territories.

Fequet said the department needs to refocus its efforts and spending to increase staff salaries, rather than reducing costs for families.

"It's not too late to avoid the train completely going off the tracks," he said.

4 day home closures since subsidy began

The new subsidy is part of a national plan to offer \$10-a-day child care across the country. The N.W.T. signed on to the deal in December.

The federal subsidy bans day home and daycare operators from raising prices past a cap of 2.3 per cent this fiscal year. If operators decide not to opt-in, however, they will not be eligible for funding from the territorial government either.

Four day homes in the territory have announced their closures since the subsidy began last month.

Fequet said while making child care more affordable for parents is a great goal, the focus should be on retaining staff and making child care more accessible by reducing wait lists — a problem that cannot be fixed without more staff support, he said.

In an average year, the Yellowknife daycare loses one or two staff members, Fequet said. In the last 12 months, they've lost eight.

He pointed to low wages and pandemic-related burnout as a few reasons for staff turnover.

The daycare has 104 spots and a wait list of over 200 people across four age groups, he said.

Staff crucial for new spots

In a Government of Canada document outlining the early child care plan between the federal and territorial governments from 2021 to 2026, the territorial government commits to using federal dollars to add 300 child care spaces for children under the age of six.

Fequet doubts whether that's possible.

"Without staff, there is no daycare centres or day homes and spaces for child care to even talk about," he said.

"I think the parents who were paying whatever fees would have been happy to keep paying them to keep their spots like the situation in Fort Smith," he said, referring to a day home run by Kristie Vyse that closed this week because of the new subsidy.

Vyse said she had a wait list of up to two years.

Patricia Davison, a board member for the NWT Early Childhood Association, said the issue of long wait lists has only worsened since the child care subsidy came into effect.

"Programs are getting all of these calls from people wanting to get their children in because it's more accessible, but they don't have the staff to accept those children or they don't have the space to accept those children," she said.

Though Davison said the NWT Early Childhood Association has yet to hear from the education department on how best to move forward, the association sent a letter to the deputy minister last week with some suggestions.

Improving staff retention is at the top of the list.

Since pay in the industry is so poor, she said staff are starting their careers in the early childhood sector and then taking their training to the school system or the government, where they can earn higher wages.

"I know programs that have positions vacant and have for a while and can't accept anymore children because they can't find the staff," she said.

Like Fequet, Davison said she's happy the plan is looking at affordability for families, but said it's important to consider whether the programs are sustainable.

Feedback to be considered

To re-evaluate the subsidy, education department spokesperson Erin Mohr told CBC the department is looking at existing funding streams to see how they can better support the entire early learning and child care system.

In an email, Mohr wrote that the department would consider feedback from providers and families following the rollout of the child care subsidy.

Asked how the department is addressing issues of access in the sector, Mohr said the education department would work on retention incentives for early childhood educators in licensed centre-based programs.

However, Mohr did not offer further details on what those incentives would be.

Mohr wrote that the education department will develop a wage grid in 2024-25 and restated the department's commitment to create 300 new child care spaces by 2025-26.

Region: Northwest Territories ^[3]

Tags: child care ^[4]

waitlist ^[5]

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