

'I'm losing hope': Cape Breton childcare realities ^[1]

Is Nova Scotia's expansion plan enough for families on the island?

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Source: Saltwire

Format: Press release

Publication Date: 21 Jun 2022

AVAILABILITY

Access online: ^[2]

EXCERPTS:

SYDNEY, N.S. — Sharalynn McNeil is usually working this time of year.

But the mother of two, who lives in Neils Harbour, can't because there isn't available child-care services near her.

In a co-parenting agreement with her five-year-old daughter's father, McNeil's the full-time provider for her youngest who is one year old.

Even if there were child-care spaces available would like to go back to working at the Keltic Lodge, where she did guest services. The shifts were 10:30 a.m.-6:30 p.m. and 4 p.m.-12 a.m.

If McNeil could find a spot, it is rare for child-care spaces in her area to go much past 6 p.m. None offer night service.

Right now, McNeil's not employed anywhere but she said she has been looking.

"I've been offered several jobs here from different places around here that would be willing to work with a daycare schedule but I just can't find any that can take my children or have room to take my children," said the 22-year-old.

McNeil is in a co-parenting agreement with her five-year-old daughter's father, who doesn't live in Neils Harbour. In the past, McNeil said they worked out a different schedule around her work schedule.

"I'd have the days that I had (my daughter) completely off," she explained. "So, I would work two weeks straight and then get four days off all in a row. Four or five days."

But with her youngest, who is a year old, McNeil is the full-time provider and caregiver.

The one nearby daycare centre, about 15 minutes away in Cape North, is full. McNeil said the other two she was aware of had recently closed. There are limited day home providers in the area.

McNeil's only option is to hire her friend's 13-year-old daughter who can babysit while school is out, so she can work a couple of months this tourism season. It's not ideal and McNeil said when school starts again, she'll lose her child care.

"I'm losing hope. I've pretty much exhausted all my options," she said. "Every time I get a little bit of a breakthrough, something happens that they overbooked or they can't work those hours. It's very discouraging."

Nova Scotia Population Growth By Age

From 2016 - 2021

Age 0-14 = 2,880 increase

Age 15-64 = 11,395 increase

Age 65 and up = 31,505

Total children ages 0-14 in Nova Scotia

2016 = 133,830

2021 = 136,710

SOURCE: Nova Scotia Finance and Treasury Board

Creating spaces

The Nova Scotia government's child-care expansion plan, announced June 1, addresses the shortage of early child-care spaces in the province.

As reported in the Cape Breton Post, 1,500 new child-care centre spaces are being created across the province. In Cape Breton, 200 of those will be in three new child-care centres and five that are already operating.

Inclusive care lacking

For Brittany Farrell, a married mother of two who lives in Iona, shift-work hours are only part of her child-care struggle.

Along with their being no after school care in the area for her school aged children, Farrell's youngest is on the autism spectrum and no one is able to care for him due to his different needs.

Farrell has two jobs — one in a long-term care facility in Baddeck and one at an Iona hotel. Her husband works in construction.

"I work while my kids are in school. Sometimes my husband has to leave work early. Sometimes I have to leave work early. Sometimes we're lucky enough that a family member can grab them after school," she said.

"It's very difficult especially because we do have such a commute in our hour. It's not just five to 10 minutes down the road. You're travelling 20 to 30 minutes, sometimes an hour if there's construction on the road...or you have to take the long way around."

Farrell's youngest can't take the bus, so along with needing to know how to care for children on the autism spectrum, they'd need to pick him up at school as well.

"I think there should be someone who specializes in disabilities, learning disabilities or any type of disability in everyday care because there are so many now," she said.

The Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development does have a mandate for inclusive child care, said Power, and it's a high priority to them.

Currently, they are working on building on the inclusion supports they have in place, such as grants for child-care centres, to increase the ability to care for children with special and complex needs.

Nicole Sullivan is a diversity and education reporter, who sometimes covers the health beat, at the Cape Breton Post.

However, they aren't scheduled to open until Dec. 31, which doesn't help McNeil.

Leslie Power, project executive of the child-care transformation team for the province, said this is year one in a five-year agreement.

"There are more expansion projects and initiatives planned, so this is just the start," Power said. "We do recognize this isn't going to be perfect for all right now."

Families have spoken to the team about the challenges of being seasonal workers and working hours outside of usual child-care centre hours.

Power said addressing this is "part of our plan" and they're working on strategies to improve the situation.

Power said the agencies are looking for home-care providers who can offer "different types of care" such as before- and after-school, nighttime or overnight care.

Nova Scotia Population Growth By Age

0-14 years: 2016 = 133,839 / 2021 = 136,710

15-64 years: 2016 = 605,950 / 2021 = 617,345

65 years and older: 2016 = 183,820 / 2021 = 215,325

SOURCE: Nova Scotia Finance and Treasury Board

Shift-work struggles

Health care is one sector where early morning and late night shifts are common. Long-term care is one example.

Bryana MacKenzie is a continuing-care assistant who is the full-time caregiver of her two boys, ages six and nine.

Shifts at the facility MacKenzie works at are 7 a.m.-3 p.m. and 3 p.m.-11 p.m.

MacKenzie's children need care before or after school depending on her schedule.

"If it wasn't for my family I don't know what I would do. I wouldn't be able to work."

MacKenzie said most of the time co-workers will switch shifts to accommodate her schedule.

"I'm very blessed that there are quite a few staff members that I work with that are willing to trade with me when I'm stuck," MacKenzie said.

"I've also been there 11 years so they know my situation."

Power said they are currently looking specifically at the issue of child care for people working in long-term care.

"There's also some work going on...in partnership with the Department of Health and long-term care, looking at how child-care centres

can work with long-term care facilities and support staff that work there," Power said.

"This are some sites that we're looking at and it's just in its infancy, so just in the beginning. Some sites have looked into it, their staff are asking for it."

Inclusive care lacking

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