

Shortage of caregivers has families struggling with rising child-care costs ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When Katie Crocker signed a contract in October, 2020, to hire a nanny from the Philippines, it was a great relief, as her family had struggled to find adequate care for Olivia, their five-year-old with severe autism.

“We spent months trying to find a caregiver who could manage her behaviour and support our family, as Olivia was regularly up all night, and we were exhausted,” said the Surrey, B.C., mother.

The family soon learned the nanny could take a year to arrive because of a backlog in the processing of applications under the new Home Child Care Provider pilot program, but she still hasn’t arrived.

The federal government has made affordable child care a cornerstone of its budget, but that program is mostly for children who have yet to start kindergarten. Nannies play a key role in many other caregiving situations and at a time when working parents – particularly mothers – are heading back to the office after working from home for two years, child care is both harder to find and more expensive.

New caregiver pilot programs

The Home Child Care Provider and Home Support Worker programs are five-year pilots, launched in 2019 and designed to test new approaches.

The previous programs, which ran from 2014 to 2019, were called Caring for Children and Caring for People with High Medical Needs. Before that was the Live-in Caregiver Program, which ran from 1992 to 2014. The 2014 programs removed the “live-in” requirement for workers in a bid to combat abuses by employers. However, they also introduced new barriers, such as a cap of 2,750 applications a year for each pilot, for a total of 5,500 workers, as well as exclusionary language and educational requirements.

In 2018, 17,700 caregivers and family members were admitted to Canada. However, 15,580 were admitted under the old Live-in Caregiver Program, under priority backlog processing for those who had applied before 2014. Only 1,645 were admitted from the two 2014 programs that year, far fewer than the 5,500 workers the pilots allowed.

According to the office of the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the new pilots launched in 2019 removed specific barriers that caregivers have faced in the past. Now they can obtain an upfront assessment for permanent residence and occupation-specific work permits and can bring family members with them to Canada.

“Caregivers from abroad play an important role in supporting Canadian families who are unable to find the care they need for family members,” IRCC spokesperson Aidan Strickland wrote in an e-mail.

“Decades of caregiver programming have highlighted the unique vulnerability experienced by caregivers who work in the home of their employer and who often live in the home too. Concerns related to worker vulnerability have driven significant program change since 2014, when the previous Live-in Caregiver Program was closed to new applicants.”

By April, 2021, only five applications had been processed under the new pilot programs and none was approved. Officials had promised to render decisions on at least 1,500 applications by June 30, 2021.

The current pilots also allow for just 2,750 applications each year and the IRCC is grappling with a backlog of 22,181 caregiver applications as of April 29, 2022, according to the Montreal-based Canadian Citizenship and Immigration Resource Center.

Canadians are paying for caregiver backlog

Amid this lack of caregivers, families are paying more.

Ms. Crocker was able to find interim, one-on-one care for her daughter for 32 hours a week. This is costing the family more than \$50,000 a year.

The cost “has had devastating impacts on our financial security. This is entirely unsustainable for our family, and we have begged the federal government to expedite the process for our nanny,” she said.

Government data shows a nationwide median wage for caregivers of less than \$16 an hour in 2021, up from less than \$13 in 2018.

Manuela Gruber Hersch, an immigration consultant and the general manager of International Nannies, arrived as a foreign nanny in 1985 from Austria and later became a permanent resident and citizen of Canada.

“Canada needs a simplified program where processing can be under six months,” she said. “To be approved for [permanent residence] adds a complex layer of processing, and the long processing times are not realistic for Canadian families in desperate need of care.”

She says the new programs have affected her business and the families they support, adding that the shortage of caregivers has only increased over time.

“It is now at a critical level as current policies have choked out options that families may choose to explore to meet their child care challenges. Much the same applies to the care of the elderly and the disabled,” Ms. Gruber Hersch said.

Ravi Jain, a certified specialist in citizenship and immigration law, works directly with nannies and caregivers who are affected by the new pilot programs.

“It’s been very tough. Caregivers are keen to come to Canada, but I’ve had to advise that they must first apply for permanent residence abroad in order to then be issued a sectoral open work permit as a caregiver, and this process is taking well over a year. In fact, I haven’t seen any approvals,” he said.

Mr. Jain also believes that faster processing is the answer.

“I have been in regular contact with my member of Parliament and have escalated this issue to the Minister of Immigration’s office. I believe that there is awareness of the issues – the question remains as to whether there is enough political motivation to address them head on,” Ms. Crocker said.

After our interview, she e-mailed to say their nanny had been approved and that her permit would be ready shortly.

“Work is ongoing to determine how the future of caregiver programming in Canada will be influenced by broader priorities on health care and affordable child care,” Ms. Strickland of the IRCC said.

The pilot programs will be assessed and, if deemed successful, may become permanent at the end of the pilot phase, which ends in June, 2024.

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