

Federal minister praises N.W.T. child-care plan progress, but local expert isn't as convinced^[1]

Child-care provider says child-care subsidy has created demand they can't meet

Author: Danen, Rose

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EXCERPTS

Karina Gould, minister of families, children and social development of Canada, praised the "positive momentum" of the N.W.T. child-care plan so far during her visit to the N.W.T. this week.

But her words contrast the concerns that continue to be raised by one expert in the territory's child-care sector.

The N.W.T government has made progress on making child care more affordable since signing onto the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement back in December.

It introduced the Child Care Fee Reduction (CCFR) subsidy in April, and, as of August, only one of the territory's 122 licensed child-care programs has not opted in to the subsidy program, according to the N.W.T's Department of Education, Culture and Employment.

This subsidy has led to a 50 per cent reduction in child-care fees for parents since April.

"My understanding is that most child-care providers have in fact opted in here in the Northwest Territories, which is fantastic, and I think it's a credit to the work that the government of the Northwest Territories is doing," said Gould.

While the reduction in fees is great for parents, said Patricia Davison, chair of the NWT Early Childhood Association, it's led to longer wait lists for child care that providers can't meet because of staffing shortages.

"Wait lists are such that people who are putting their children on the wait list — I hate to say, they won't have an opportunity for a space," said Davison. "The wait lists are that long."

Spaces, staffing should have come 1st, Davison says

CBC News reported in April that daycare providers were frustrated with wait lists and staff shortages not being prioritized, as well as a lack of communication from the government about the CCFR subsidy.

Davison says these frustrations have persisted four months later.

When asked about the frustrations expressed by child-care providers, Gould said \$10-a-day child care is something that can't be built overnight because there's a lot of different elements, and that's why it's a five-year plan.

"We're doing something new, right? So there's going to be some bumps along the way," said Gould. "There's going to be some adjustments. That's normal anytime you're doing something that's brand new."

The Canada-N.W.T Child Care Agreement does include plans to create 300 new licensed early learning and child-care spaces by the end of March 2026. It also includes plans to fund incentives (such as introducing a wage grid) to attract, retain and grow a skilled workforce of early childhood educators.

But Davison says these plans should have been prioritized over reducing child-care fees.

"You need to look at the front end of the issue. If the issue is no staff and then no spaces, you need to take care of those two issues before you take care of other issues," said Davison.

Waiting to see what happens

This approach to improving child-care access is not new, according to Davison. A sector-led Early Childhood Symposium was held in 2019 to answer the question: "What would universal child care look like in the N.W.T.?"

Child-care providers agreed the number one thing to address was staffing issues, second the number of spaces, and then affordability, according to Davison.

Introducing the CCFR subsidy before addressing staff shortages could lead to bigger issues, according to Davison.

"I'm concerned that programs and space are going to start closing because they can't find staff and they can't maintain staff."

Davison said she knows of a few child-care programs that are "hanging in there" to see what impact the workforce incentives will have.

"We're just hoping we can get through some of these challenges and figure out what's best for the sector, for the families," said Davison.

Region: Northwest Territories ^[3]

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