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Ukrainian mothers in Manitoba struggle to access jobs without child care [1]

Author: Hempel, Rosanna
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EXCERPTS

Alena Ostropilets guided her five-year-old boys by hand to the school bus as it pulled up to their stop, towering over them.

The twins climbed up the steps wearing matching backpacks and traditional Ukrainian shirts, to the driver's friendly greeting.

Thursday was Oleksander's and Roman's first day of school.

It was also their mother's first day without her children since fleeing Ukraine. Ostropilets will miss them, but she's also anxious to find a job and improve her English, she said.

"I need to work every day because we need money for lives in Canada."

However, Ostropilets has been struggling to secure daycare that accommodates their school division's "one day on, one day off" Kindergarten schedule.

Though a family lawyer by trade, she's prepared to take on something else to help provide for her family, which is currently running on one income.

"It's very difficult for him and for me," said Ostropilets, whose husband works in a factory outside Winnipeg.

Ostropilets isn't alone in her struggle to access daycare, so she can support her family in a new country.

Hundreds of Ukrainian mothers in Manitoba share the same story, except many are without their husbands and a steady income, Olesia Chychkevych said.

"The problem is they are ready to go to work because they need money to live, to buy food, to pay rent, but they can't," Chychkevych, who volunteers with the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, told Global News on Thursday.

"They have to stay at home with their kids, and there are no opportunities for them just to find work, and it's the main problem for each of us."

A refugee herself, Chychkevych helped conduct a survey of Ukrainian mothers and discussed the results with provincial government officials. The Ukrainian Canadian Congress also shared its concerns and potential solutions.

The province says it has processes in place to assist newcomers in securing daycare, a spokesperson said in an emailed statement Thursday.

"Early Learning and Child Care has been working with Ukrainian families to find care through the Manitoba Child Care Search Tool and direct contact with licensed child care facilities that have available spaces," the spokesperson said.

The province also recently launched the Newcomer Employment Hub (NEH) Child Care Pilot Project, alongside the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce. The project is helping those newcomers using NEH to find work and overcome barriers like finding licensed child care and retaining employment, the spokesperson wrote.

"By April 2023, the $1-million investment will support 68 fully subsidized licensed child care spaces," the spokesperson said.

The province may explore more funding for building renovations to add child care spaces after it reviews the results of the pilot project.

But Chychkevych said hundreds of children are in need of daycare and before-and-after school programs now, which are affordable and in the areas where they live.

She fears some mothers will pull their older kids from school to care for the younger ones while they work.

"I'm very worried about this," Chychkevych said.

Meanwhile, Ostropilets is carving out time to practise her English, so she can be ready to enter the workforce when that day comes.

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