

Nova Scotia families tangled in daycare red tape ^[1]

Operators navigate licensing bureaucracy

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EXCERPTS

Kate Chisholm got Huxley out of the car Monday morning, got him a snack, let the dog out to pee and then sat down to try to think, with her 18-month-old in his playpen.

He's on a waiting list at three daycares in Antigonish.

They'd each told Chisholm that to be assured a spot you need to get on the waiting list when you're considering having a baby.

"If I didn't love my job, I would have quit long ago," said Chisholm, who works as a florist in town and fishes with her partner, on the days child care is available, during the spring lobster season.

She also serves as executive director of a non-profit refugee resettlement agency, which has flexible hours that allow her to work when Huxley is sleeping or when her partner isn't working his full-time day job, or his part-time graphic design business or fishing.

Like most every other young family, they're flat out trying to keep up with the rising cost of living while raising the next generation. To make it work, they need child care that doesn't exist.

A \$605-million agreement signed with the federal government with much fanfare two years ago that promised \$10-a-day daycare by 2026 is actually making the shortage much worse in the present, with no sign of alleviating over the coming years due to provisions prohibiting the opening of new private daycare spaces.

The hardship it is creating is falling disproportionately on those the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Childcare Agreement was meant to help: women.

Both the primarily female entrepreneurs who own private daycares and the mothers who can't work because they can't find anyone to watch their children.

"I would like to work full time but I've been staring down the barrel of the gun now of having to quit," said Chisholm.

"I know that is a privilege because so many people don't have that option; I can't imagine the stress they are under."

Haley Jordan and Brigitte Forrestall were feeling that stress last Friday.

"She came back with her child and she was crying, saying if we couldn't take him she'd lose her job," said Forrestall.

"I kept saying, 'I can't, we don't have the spaces.' . . . Every day it's phone calls and the same conversations."

Jordan and Forrestall have been fighting to be allowed to add more spaces but, like every other private daycare operator in the province, have been prohibited by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

The young early childhood educators bought Red Apple Children's Centre in Antigonish from their former employer in July 2021, two weeks after the Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Childcare Agreement was signed.

Red Apple had two daycare facilities in Antigonish (one on Carter Crescent and another on Highland Drive) that had a total of 70 spaces.

Just before they bought Red Apple, the owner of the building on Highland Drive sought a different use for the space.

"As we worked toward buying it we were talking to people in the Department of Finance, the Department of Education, and no one told us they were going to eliminate those spaces (on Highland Drive)," said Forrestall.

"Why would you shut down spaces when that's the goal?"

After buying Red Apple, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development informed them they wouldn't issue a licence to them for the 30 spaces on Highland Drive because it had been cancelled after not having been used for a year.

Half their business was gone, as were jobs for the six early childhood educators they would have hired to staff it.

Red Apple has a waiting list of 150 families, many of which have multiple children needing care.

“Under the Canada-Nova Scotia Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, the federal government requires that Nova Scotia prioritize space expansion in the non-profit sector,” reads a written response to SaltWire questions from Department of Education and Early Childhood Development spokeswoman Barbara MacLean.

“Private operators can continue to operate their existing spaces, up to their total licensed capacity.”

The department didn’t answer the following question: Why?

While the agreement “prioritizes” non-profit expansion of licences, anecdotally it appears to be an out-right ban on renewing existing private licences that have been unused or granting new ones.

Of the 330 licensed child-care centres in Nova Scotia providing 17,000 spaces for children, 59 per cent are private while 41 per cent are operated by non-profits.

The department also didn’t answer SaltWire’s request for a breakdown of how many spaces existed before the agreement being signed in 2021, compared with today.

In Antigonish alone, between the licence for 30 spaces cancelled on Highland Drive and one for 20 more at another private daycare operator, there are 50 fewer spaces than before the Canada-Nova Scotia Early Learning and Child Care Agreement was signed.

“I can’t tell you how many times I have had nurses turn down overtime and casual shifts because they did not have any child care for their children,” Lindsay Stevens, a registered nurse and facility manager at St. Mary’s Hospital in Sherbrooke, wrote Premier Tim Houston and Education Minister Becky Druhan on Aug. 15.

“To try and recruit and retain nurses in a rural hospital, where they can’t secure any suitable child care to meet their shift work needs, is a disservice to our community, and most definitely to our small rural hospital that is suffering from increased work demands and decreased staff retention.”

Stevens, along with local business owners and the Municipality of the District of St. Mary’s, asked the provincial government to grant a private licence to Storybrooke Daycare.

They’ve all been unsuccessful.

Owner Carla Archibald began leasing the purpose-built daycare building by the St. Mary’s Education Centre/Academy in August.

She offered to make upgrades to the building (a child-sized toilet, a separate washroom for staff and a larger fenced outdoor play area) to meet requirements.

Storybrooke would have created four jobs (including Archibald’s) in Sherbrooke and created 22 regulated daycare spaces for parents whose costs would have been subsidized under the Canada-Nova Scotia Early Learning and Child Care Agreement.

But Storybrooke was refused a licence because the government is not issuing them to private operators.

There are no non-profit alternatives in Sherbrooke. In fact, there are zero regulated daycare spaces in the Eastern Shore community.

Archibald was initially told that she could buy a licence from a closing daycare somewhere else in the province and move it to Sherbrooke.

“But that’s just a piece of paper the government makes up, and I’d have to pass that cost along to my parents,” said Archibald.

That option became moot when she was told she wouldn’t be allowed to move a licence because it would have expired with any operator that shut down.

She was offered a private “in-home” licence, which would have allowed for seven subsidized spaces, but was told she would have to live in the building.

But it’s a child-care facility, not a personal house, so Archibald can’t live in it.

She’s allowed to offer child care for six children, whose parents pay \$50 a day and aren’t eligible for any subsidies.

Because few can afford the service, she currently has four children full time, which most weeks doesn’t cover her cost of operating.

Storybrooke will end its lease at the end of this month.

“So, yet again, us women don’t get to work,” said Archibald.

Beyond the frustrations of licensing are issues of recognizing education.

Archibald graduated from a two-year human services program at the Nova Scotia Community College in 2011, with a focus on adolescents. She added a one-year behavioural intervention program and has worked in child care ever since.

But the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has refused to grant her status as a Level 1 early childhood educator, which requires a one-year community college program in early childhood education.

All this means that if she were granted a licence, she still wouldn’t count as one of the early childhood educators at her proposed facility.

Still, Archibald said she'd be willing to hire staff and complete the one-year program required to get certification.

"I'd do it, even though I'm still paying on the student loans for three years of training they won't recognize."

At Red Apple, Jordan and Forrestall were in their office trying to understand the new funding formulas released by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

The move to \$10-a-day daycare will see the provincial government increasingly dictating the operations of longstanding small businesses by saying what it will and won't pay for.

If daycare owners don't sign on to what's on offer, they won't receive the subsidies and won't be able to offer affordable care.

Last week, the province announced a roughly 30 per cent pay hike for early childhood educators that is retroactive to July 4, bringing Level 1 ECEs up to a base pay of \$19.10 per hour.

"Which was welcome," said Forrestall.

But the subsidy is only for ECEs working on the floor, not to help with other staffing costs that go with running the facility.

"They will only pay centres the amount they feel they need to create supervision," said Jordan.

"It doesn't include extra staff needed for special needs behaviours, the cooks, the cleaner, covering lunch breaks, the beginning and end of day (when extra help is needed getting children in and out the door.)"

What Jordan and Forrestall do know is that they're losing money.

They'll need to wait until the end of the year to learn how much and whether they can survive to provide the \$10-a-day daycare the government has promised by 2026.

Region: Nova Scotia ^[3]

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