

Ontario seeks to add 50K child-care spots, focusing on underserved areas ^[1]

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Excerpts

Now that thousands of Ontario families are paying reduced child-care fees under the national \$10-a-day program, work is underway to ensure equal and greater access to affordable care – with those in the sector pointing to workforce retention and home daycare as key to the expansion.

Ontario committed in its March 2022 deal with the federal government to create 86,000 new spaces, and since it counts spots that have opened since 2019, it has about 50,000 more to go.

The government is now consulting on its expansion plan and has given municipalities the numbers of spaces they should create, with the highest number – 7,621 – in Peel Region, which the government says is due to a large and fast-growing population, as well as socioeconomic indicators.

Municipalities now must identify priority neighbourhoods for new spaces, particularly to support low-income families, diverse communities, Francophone and Indigenous families, and those needing overnight or weekend care.

The numbers are largely based on a goal of having a ratio of one affordable child care space for every 2.7 children under the age of five, according to a provincial memo obtained by The Canadian Press.

“Working towards this ratio will significantly decrease the disparities in access to child care across the province,” the government wrote in the memo to municipal child-care service managers.

Ontario calculated the space allocations using factors such as demographic data and existing licensed child-care capacity. A portion of spaces is also aimed at boosting access for certain populations, including single-parent families, low-income families, recent immigrants and a number of women between ages 25 and 44 who aren’t in the labour force.

The availability of spaces varies so widely now because there hasn’t been an overarching plan before, said Morna Ballantyne, the executive director of advocacy group Child Care Now.

“Licensed childcare exists where individuals or organizations, whether they’re entrepreneurs or whether they’re not-for-profit organizations, have just decided to open up a licensed child-care facility,” she said in an interview.

“Whenever you have a market based system, and especially one that is supposed to be providing an essential service like early childhood education, you have very uneven supply, inadequate supply and often very expensive supply.”

Municipalities should get more involved in directly providing child care, establishing centres where they are most needed, Ballantyne said.

In eastern Ontario, that is what Russell Township is doing. The small, fast-growing municipality southeast of Ottawa — its population rose nearly 20 per cent from 2016 to 2021 — is taking over the 186 spaces from a private daycare that closed during the pandemic.

“We’re just on the outskirts of Ottawa, homes tend to be a little bit more affordable,” said Mayor Pierre Leroux. “So, young families are coming out for affordable housing, and then having kids and (it) doesn’t take long to realize that there’s not many daycare spots here.”

The township also recently approved a 20 per cent salary increase for child-care staff to try to recruit and retain educators. Leroux said his community is experiencing the same child-care labour shortage being felt across the province.

Bolstering the workforce is a key piece of the current government consultations, with officials saying without any new measures the province will be 8,500 registered early childhood educators short by 2026.

Meanwhile, the sector is already facing a staffing crunch. The number of RECEs in licensed child care decreased by seven per cent between 2019 and 2021, government documents say.

Diane Daley, the CEO of Family Day, which has both centre- and home-based daycares in the Greater Toronto Area, said workforce is one

of the most pressing issues.

"If we're going to achieve this expansion, we're going to have to address this issue around staff retention, recruitment, salary, benefits, and so on," she said.

Daley also notes that home-based child-care can allow the province to add spaces faster than in centres.

"It can be scaled fairly quickly, as long as we have caregivers, and it doesn't require the same level of capital investment as you would for a centre-based setting," she said.

"We're advocates for both. We believe families should have options. But this is where I believe licensed home child care will be critical to ... supporting the expansion in our communities."

Licensed home daycares are also well-equipped to offer care outside of traditional hours, Daley noted. The province wants to see evening, weekend and overnight child care expanded to benefit parents who work shifts. Currently, less than one per cent of centres offer evening or overnight care, versus eight to 12 per cent of home daycares.

Trevor Fowler, the director of child care and early years for London, Ont., said the city is looking at whether it could create incentives for more home-based care, since those spaces could get up and running more quickly.

In London, and in other municipalities, the next steps in expansion are studying demographics and consulting with members of the community.

"It's not just about expansion anywhere, it's about targeted expansion," Fowler said.

"It's about helping serve underserved communities better. Our data right now, it tells us where people live and that's great. But knowing where they live is not the same as knowing where they want their child care to be, or what they want it to be like."

A spokesperson for Education Minister Stephen Lecce said the government is providing more than \$200 million in start up grants to help child-care providers in underserved areas increase capacity and create new spaces.

Once the province sees the 50,000 spaces created, it may not be nearly enough.

Ontario's Financial Accountability Office calculated that increased demand for affordable care will leave the province short more than 220,000 spots. The province is open to ideas for more aggressive growth.

"In recognition of the existing and anticipated induced demand for affordable child care, service system managers are also invited to share information related to additional capacity for growth," the government said in its memo to municipalities.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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