

Parents calling for more accessible child care arrange petition playdate at House of Assembly ^[1]

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Excerpts

Parents desperate for child care took their quest to the Newfoundland and Labrador legislature Thursday, meeting with MHAs and presenting a petition urging the government to make child care more accessible.

Erin Cullen, at the House of Assembly with her 11-month-old daughter Aoife, said the provincial government has taken a "great step forward" by making it affordable by bringing in \$10-a-day daycare, but the next step is making it more available so parents don't have to sacrifice work for child care.

"In a lot of cases, people we know are having one parent stay at home. In this economy, it's very tough to live on a single income, especially with children," said Cullen.

Cullen was among several parents at Confederation Building on Thursday afternoon with the group Advocates for Building Childcare Capacity and Supporting Early Childhood Educators — or ABCs & ECEs for N.L. The group had a petition presented to the House while its members watched from the public gallery, many with young children on their laps.

"We're seeing grandparents who are having to step in, and these are people who, you know, have worked their careers, raised their children, and now having to do full-time child care, which is difficult for them to do as well," said Cullen.

The lack of child care affects the entire province, she said, by removing parents from the workforce and contributing to labour shortages.

"We have nurses in our group who are ready and willing to go back to work and just can't find child care, and so those are less nurses in our ERs, those are less nurses on ... surgical floors where people have day surgeries, so it really impacts the whole province."

Terrilynn Gill is one of those nurses. She and her husband have struggled to find child care, so she left her job at the Health Sciences Centre in St. John's to work as an agency nurse, which supplements the household income but takes her away from home.

"It's been really difficult for my husband, who is a very skilled carpenter, cabinet-maker, well respected in his trade. He has had to stop working for the first time in his entire life and be home full time," she said.

"I don't get to spend time with my baby. I have to drive and go away to work in order to even put food on our table, so it's kinda really crappy, especially when we're so short here."

Gill and her husband recently moved home to Newfoundland from Ontario to raise her own family, but she's worried they'll have to leave again.

"The last thing I want to do is leave Newfoundland again but, you know, if child care isn't accessible here, if you have to wait two years for your child to even potentially get into a daycare centre, then a lot of families will be left with the only alternative, and that's to leave the province — which nobody wants."

In the House of Assembly, Opposition health critic Barry Petten pointed to a report released this week that found Newfoundland and Labrador has child care available for just 14 per cent of children under 12 — half the national average of 29 per cent.

"Why has government failed 86 per cent of the families in this province who are desperately looking for child care?" he asked during question period.

Education Minister John Haggie responded that the report's data covers just 2019-2021, and that the government is working to add many more spaces.

"We have added 480 spaces for children in the early learning and child care sector in four months alone," he said. "Our target was 700 for this year; we are going faster than we had planned."

Cullen said the government is doing some good work to improve access but there are thousands and thousands of children without a space.

"Seven hundred is a great first step, but it's really just a first step," said Cullen.

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