

Child-care programs need more cash, says researcher, as N.L. releases review of operating grant ^[1]

If governments want to improve working conditions, says Martha Friendly, they need to spend more money

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Excerpts

A child-care researcher says the new \$10-a-day system needs more cash from the federal and provincial governments in order to raise wages and improve working conditions for early childhood educators.

A review by Deloitte consultants of the operating grant program that funds regulated child-care centres and some day homes in Newfoundland and Labrador has identified room for improvement, including enhancing benefits for ECEs in order to entice people to stay in the profession, since they often don't have pensions or benefits, like paid sick leave.

Researcher Martha Friendly says benefits, along with better wages and working conditions, along with benefits, are also important in recruiting and retaining workers needed to expand the child-care system.

"But to raise the wages of the people working in the sector, it's quite possible that there's going to have to be more money," said Martha Friendly, executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, a non-profit research institute based in Toronto that advocates for an equitable child-care system in Canada.

"Most of the money has been spent on making it more affordable to parents," she said. "Where is the money coming from for the workforce? And the only two sources that I can think of are the provincial government or the federal government. They're not going to be making cupcakes to raise the money."

...

Child-care workers in Nova Scotia will be eligible for group health benefits as of May, and the provincial government there will pay employer contributions, amounting to \$12.3 million for the health plan and \$8.8 for the pension, while workers will pay five per cent of their wages into each plan.

"I thought the Nova Scotia model of a pension was actually quite good," said Friendly. "So I hope that that's the kind of thing that [Newfoundland and Labrador will] be looking at."

...

Other suggestions include adjusting funding rates to inflation, developing a provincial wait-list, extending full-time hours for centres, considering a substitute ECE program, and simplifying and streamlining services for child-care providers.

"I think that that's the kind of thing that is majorly important in shifting from this kind of diffuse patchwork market to a system," said Friendly. "It could be really simplified."

She says the push to expand the child-care system also needs to be more assertive, with demand forecasting to determine what services need to be built out and where in order to prevent what's known as child-care deserts, where demand far outstrips supply.

Proper demand forecasting is necessary, said Friendly, because there are extremely few infant spaces for families, 56 per cent of child-care services are clustered in the St. John's area, and the province has regulated child-care spaces for only 14 per cent of kids under 12.

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Picco said the Education Department created 1,200 new child-care spots in 2023, or about 20 per cent of the 6,000 the provincial and federal governments have promised by 2025.

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