

Child-care wait-lists balloon in many Ontario regions amid \$10-a-day program ^[1]

TORONTO - Child-care waiting lists have ballooned across Ontario since the province signed on to the national \$10-a-day program, as demand due to the lower fees appears to be far outpacing the creation of new spaces in many regions.

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Excerpts

TORONTO - Child-care waiting lists have ballooned across Ontario since the province signed on to the national \$10-a-day program, as demand due to the lower fees appears to be far outpacing the creation of new spaces in many regions.

In Kawartha Lakes, one of several municipalities with a central waiting list, children are now set to spend an average of 6.4 years waiting for licensed child care, up from an average of 3.7 years in early 2022, before Ontario joined the program.

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The centralized waiting lists largely involve child-care operators that are part of the national program as 92 per cent across the province have opted in to the \$10-a-day system. Both licensed centre-based operators and licensed home daycares can be part of the federal program.

The waiting list in Kawartha Lakes has grown in part due to the increased demand that has come from significantly reduced fees – they have so far been cut in half and are set to be lowered further under the national program – and partly due to a shortage of early childhood educators, Mitchell said.

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The promise of 86,000 child-care spaces includes ones created since 2019. Ontario has seen more than 41,000 spots added since then, Lecce said, though his office said not all of those are in centres that are part of the \$10-a-day program.

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Kawartha Lakes has been successful in increasing the number of licensed home daycares, but child-care operators have said government funding for new centre-based spaces is too restrictive, Mitchell said.

The funding can be used for renovations to create new spaces or to buy equipment, but cannot be used to buy land or buildings, or for school-based spaces.

Lecce said the money offered through startup grants represents about one-third of the cost of starting a new child-care centre.

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A representative from Andrew Fleck Children's Services in Ottawa told a provincial pre-budget hearing last month that Ontario's delayed release of a new funding formula for the \$10-a-day program is also contributing to hampering the creation of new spaces.

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Some operators have said that the current funding model, in which parents pay half of what fees were in 2022 and the government pays the other half, is not enough to cover rising expenses such as staffing costs, catering, rent, heating and supplies. They are calling for a new model that reimburses them for the true cost of operating child care.

When fees are further reduced to an average of \$10 a day, Mitchell, in Kawartha Lakes, believes that will fuel further demand. Ontario's push to build 1.5 million homes by 2031 will also contribute to demand, she said.

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A spokesperson for Jenna Sudds, the federal minister of families, children and social development, said the government knew there would be challenges in developing the system, but it is ready to face them.

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