

Child-care crunch puts parents in bind [CA-AB]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Muffy McKay was caught in the bind that affects thousands of Alberta parents.

Her maternity benefits were running out, and she knew she had to get back to work.

But finding a decent child-care centre for her twin eight-month-old boys was proving to be elusive for the single mom.

She had looked at 10 day-care centres, and she didn't feel comfortable leaving her kids at any of them. "It was awful -- I was panicking," said McKay, who works as an administrator at the Edmonton Folk Music Festival office. "I was in a situation where I had to get child care. I had no choice, other than going on welfare."

It is also generally more difficult to find spots in child-care centres for babies, who require a larger staff ratio, and with two babies the odds were even more against her. She was kicking herself for not starting the child-care search well before the twins were born.

She lucked out when a day-care centre called Kids 'R' Us miraculously had two vacancies coming up in March.

"I didn't even go and look at the day-care. On the phone I said: 'I'll take it.'"

Kids 'R' Us turned out to be a good fit. She likes the staff, the multicultural nature of the place and her boys seem to be thriving on it.

But Keri Clark, an administrator at the electronic game company BioWare, still hasn't found a permanent solution for her child-care needs after looking for 14 months.

"I've looked at 30 places -- day cares and day homes. Of the 30, there are 15 I'd consider, and of those 15, there are 10 I could afford," Clark said.

Clark and her husband, Chris Martin, have encountered many barriers. Some of the best day-care centres put low-income earners on the top of the list, and families with kids in the centres who have second babies get priority. One centre she looked into wanted \$1,100 per month, "and that's a mortgage."

Their 18-month-old son, Skipper Martin, is in an unlicensed day home as his name sits on numerous waiting lists. Even that option will end this spring because the operator is pregnant and will soon leave the business.

Labour lawyer Cherie Langlois-Klassen, who has twin 18-month-old girls, has been looking for more than a year for day care. Langlois-Klassen and her partner have decided that they will only accept top quality non-profit day care, and they are on seven waiting lists.

"We could go to the Happy Crappy strip mall day-care centre. We could find a place, but we want a quality place," she said.

They have some flexibility because her partner is a graduate student and can plan her work day around the kids' needs. But during times like final exams, they are both busy and the kids are getting babysat by different friends and relatives every day.

The stories of these three families are repeated across the province, and right across Canada.

The previous Liberal federal government started implementing a long-belated promise to create a national child-care system, but one of the first things the Harper government did after being elected in 2006 was to channel that money into \$100-per-child monthly payments to parents rather than create more spaces.

Child care is a provincial responsibility, and Alberta has been among the lowest spenders on it, according to national surveys by the University of Toronto's Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

And the group Public Interest Alberta has tracked Alberta spending on child care, finding that the province's spending on it in 2005-2006 was less than the transfer payments it received from Ottawa.

The provincial government has acknowledged that the lack of child care is a major problem. Premier Ed Stelmach made an election pledge

to help encourage the creation of 14,000 new child-care spots by 2011, and the province says it has started creating new spaces through measures such as wage supplements for child-care workers, bigger subsidies for parents and small startup grants for operators.

Children's Services Minister Janis Tarchuk declined to be interviewed, but a department spokeswoman said she will announce a plan in the coming weeks.

A new plan could be late for parents who want high-quality day care for their children today.

For instance, the non-profit Oliver Centre has a wait list of 300 children for more than two years, said centre director Avril Pike. They recommend that families put their future progeny on the list as soon as they find out they are expecting.

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Pike said it saddens her to see so many parents frustrated in their desire to find the best quality child care, but there's not much she can do about the general problem.

"Once a parent gets children into our program, they tend not to move away," Pike said. "They may move house, but they don't tend to move to another day care."

Some of the better day-care centres, including the University Learning Centre in Hub Mall, have even started charging a fee just to be put on the waiting list.

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The \$50 fee, which went into effect earlier this year, covers the administrative expenses of keeping a data base with 200 families on it, which represents a three-year wait.

With such a shortage of quality child care, young parents in the Alberta Avenue area have found an innovative way to cope with it.

They're looking after each other's children.

Becky Picard, the mother of a 10-month-old girl, said the idea occurred when a group of parents was sitting around the Carrot community coffee house, all wondering what they were going to do when the time came to return to work.

"Everyone was drawing a blank, and it was going to cost a lot of money," said Picard, a visual artist and teacher.

They were all having trouble finding a decent affordable day-care centre, and because demand is so high many centres don't want children who are there part-time.

The parents came up with the idea of a child-care swapping system. So far six families have signed up, and there's probably room for another two, she said.

"A lot of parents share values around how we want our children to be cared for," she said. "It's working out really well. I feel we're sort of beating the system."

So far they're doing straight swaps, but the families will probably try to work out a voucher system at some point so all of the parents share equally in the work, she said.

"We've gotten to know each other, so it's not just a bunch of strangers," she said.

"Everybody wins, and that's what's so great about it."

WHO'S MINDING THE CHILDREN?

Day 1: Working parents are having a hard time finding child care. High-quality day-care centres have a waiting list of up to three years -- and some have even started charging a fee just to be on the list.

Day 2: Alberta needs more child-care spaces, but there is a severe staff shortage in an economy where people can make almost the same wages working at Tim Hortons as they can at a day-care centre. We meet two young early childhood education graduates, neither of whom will be working at a traditional day-care centre.

Day 3: The province plans to help increase the number of child care spaces by 40 per cent in the next three years. That could be a daunting task in the current economic climate.

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