

Getting day care isn't child's play [CA-NS]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Parents who need child care in metro Halifax are waiting on lists that are hundreds deep.

There is no sign that recent federal spending is relieving the problem. Some day-care centres report it's getting worse.

Parents typically join several wait lists to improve their chances, said Margo Kirk, executive director of University Children's Centre on South Street. Even then, many can't find a space by the time they have to go back to work.

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Kirk is a member of the Action Coalition on Early Childhood Education and Care. The group recently surveyed licensed child-care centres throughout Nova Scotia.

Three of the 32 licensed centres that responded reported no wait list. They were located in Clare and Shelburne County. The longest queue is 435 at the Wee Care Development Centre in Halifax, which offers services for children with special needs.

The average queue in Halifax Regional Municipality is 109.

University Children's Centre had 124 lined-up for spaces before March 1. Another 153 were waiting for spaces after that date. Kirk said many of those parents are looking for spaces for 12-month old infants as they return to work from parental leave.

She expects to have six infant spaces open this year.

Kirk said families that find infant-care spaces are usually on the wait list from the moment the mother learns she's pregnant. Even then, there is no guarantee they will find a space.

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Community Services spokeswoman Krista Grant said there is a shortage of child-care spaces in Nova Scotia. The lists are not a good measure of the problem, however, because parents often join several lists.

"The department recognizes it can be challenging to find space, particularly for infant care," she said.

The province is committed to create an additional 1,000 spaces over the next four years, Grant said. Some of those will be at small, licensed day care centres located in family homes. That's supposed to be particularly helpful in rural areas that can't support large child-care centres.

Community Services has recently offered improvement loans to child-care centres. Last fall, it added 150 portable spaces for subsidized day care. Parents who get those subsidies still have to line up for day-care spaces.

It's part of a 10-year child-care plan the province pulled together last year. The first five years of funding is coming from a remains of a federal plan to expand child care across Canada.

Sue Wolstenholme is a spokeswoman with the Action Coalition on Early Childhood Education and Care with 39 years of experience in the field. She said the provincial strategy is contained on just one page. She has no faith it will increase the supply of space, or conditions for child-care workers and centres.

Many in the field work for \$8 an hour, and have no sick days or other benefits.

"It's not a plan," she said. "It doesn't offer any kind of improvement in the system."

Prime Minister Stephen Harper said he was giving parents a choice when he redirected money earmarked for a national strategy into tax breaks. Wolstenholme said it has been a failure.

"There's no choice, because there's no space."

- reprinted from the Halifax Daily News

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