

Still waiting for daycare relief [CA] ^[1]

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 16 Jan 2007

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

When Toronto physician Heather MacNeill was pregnant with her first child, she dutifully put her name on the waiting list for a toddler space at Withrow Childcare Centre.

Almost four years later, her daughter Leia, now 3 ½, is still waiting for a spot in the popular Riverdale-area daycare.

"We did our research and my husband and I really wanted our child to be in a good daycare in our neighbourhood," said MacNeill, who gave birth to the couple's second child in September and is making do with a nanny when she works.

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MacNeill is just one of thousands of Canadian parents scrambling to find high-quality licensed child care for their young children.

Making good on the Conservatives' election promise to create 125,000 new child-care spots through tax incentives to employers and community groups is one of Human Resources Minister Monte Solberg's first challenges in his new portfolio.

But with businesses balking and advocates charging that new spaces will fail without money for salaries and programming, expectations are low.

"We don't hold out any hope that a new minister will make any difference when this government has been so clearly anti-child care," said Monica Lysack of the Canadian Child Care Advocacy Association.

The Tories' controversial decision to scrap the Liberals' \$5 billion federal-provincial child-care initiative in favour of \$100 monthly payments to parents and a modest building program makes daycare the highest profile responsibility Solberg inherits in the sprawling human resources and social development post.

But his mandate also includes social housing, employment insurance as well as support for low-income children, seniors and the disabled. And advocates in those areas are clamouring for the new minister's ear.

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Laurel Rothman, head of Campaign 2000, a national group dedicated to ending child poverty, received an email from Solberg's office on the day of the cabinet shuffle after months of unanswered calls to the previous minister.

Her group wants the federal child-tax benefit raised from about \$3,200 per child annually to \$5,000 for low-income families, along with better employment support, affordable housing and child care.

The group was disappointed when Prime Minister Stephen Harper refused to roll the Tories' \$1,200 taxable child-care allowance into the non-taxable children's benefit. And Rothman is wary about reading too much into Solberg's new appointment.

"Let's just say we hope a new set of eyes will bring a new perspective," she said.

But child-care activists aren't holding their breath.

In a detailed report released last week, the advocacy association said the Tories' plan to provide one-time tax credits or grants of up to \$10,000 for each new child-care spot won't create the kind of early-learning and care system Canada needs.

"A commitment to create 125,000 spaces is like putting 125,000 empty desks in classrooms," Lysack said.

"If you don't have money for teachers or to heat and run the school, you don't have anything," she said. "Desks and textbooks don't deliver education, people do. And that's the Tories' dilemma with child care."

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An advisory committee on the Tory child-care space initiative, struck last fall by Finley, is expected to report by the end of the month.

Chair Gordon Chong said the committee consulted widely with businesses and community groups and is aware of problems with earlier attempts to build workplace child care.

"We've taken that into consideration in making our recommendations," he said, adding that it's up to government to make the report public.

In a statement last week, Solberg said the Tories have sent \$1.2 billion to Canadian families to use on child care since the new funding began last July. And \$250 million will be spent in 2007-08 to build new spaces.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Canada ^[2]

Tags: spaces ^[3]

availability ^[4]

federal programs ^[5]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/07/01/still-waiting-daycare-relief-ca> [2] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/spaces> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/availability> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-programs>