

Childcare and education feel the pressure in Fort McMurray ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Alberta's oilsands boom is producing a bit of a baby boom that's expected to strain day cares and schools in Fort McMurray.

Often painted as a rough-and-tumble northern Alberta town inhabited mostly by young working men, children could soon be one of the fastest growing demographics in the region as younger workers flock to the area and nature begins taking its course.

Day-care spots are already in short supply, while demand has jumped so much in the past year that community officials have struck a coalition to look at the problem.

"Every day we probably get 10 people asking if we have a list of day cares or dayhomes," says Debbie Martin-Cox, executive director of the HUB, a resource centre for families. "All of sudden we're asking, where did all these kids come from?"

At the YMCA, the city's largest licensed provider, 300 families are on the wait-list for day care and after-school programs nearly as many as there are spots.

Throughout Fort McMurray, it's estimated at least 1,600 kids are in need of some form of childcare.

"The need for childcare is hand-in-hand with the need for people to populate the workforce," said Carol Theberge, chief executive of the Fort McMurray YMCA.

It's a shift that's become more apparent in the past couple of years as more workers exchange a commuter lifestyle and settle with their families in the community.

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Aleen Conradie moved to Fort McMurray from South Africa two years ago with her husband, a local physician. After giving birth last year, the nail technician planned to go back to work, but had trouble finding childcare for her son, now 15 months old.

"I realized that I could find a job, but I can't find day care or somebody to look after my child," she says. "There's just no place to take them anywhere, that was my big problem, all the day homes are full and the lists are so long you just can't believe it."

Conradie instead looked into opening one herself, launching Sunny Kids Daycare this month.

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Growing demand for child care, coupled with large amounts of shift work in the oilsands mines and other businesses, have also raised demand for live-in nannies. International Nannies & Homecare Ltd. opened an office in Fort McMurray, where requests have basically doubled in the past five years.

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- reprinted from the Calgary Herald

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