

# Don't kill national child-care plan [CA] <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Miller, David

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

When Prime Minister Stephen Harper named Quebec MP Lawrence Cannon to be his minister of transportation, infrastructure and communities, there was a glimmer of hope that cities like Toronto might yet attain their long-awaited New Deal with Ottawa.

Unfortunately, the optimism Cannon's cabinet appointment prompted was all but wiped out when the new national government announced its first order of business: Cancellation of the ground-breaking child-care agreement its Liberal predecessor signed with the provinces.

This was devastating news for the City of Toronto. Under the five-year agreement signed by Ottawa and Queen's Park, the city planned to add 6,000 child-care spaces in 120 new or expanded centres. For the first time ever, Toronto would be able to work in partnership with the federal government and the province to deliver a major increase in services for our children.

Many of those extra spaces and new facilities were destined for the 13 communities the city has identified as priorities because of their high levels of poverty and the significant number of children and youth with futures at risk. That's where the need is greatest.

But by terminating the existing child-care agreement at the end of its first year, Stephen Harper's Conservatives will ensure that as many as 95 of the 120 new and improved centres the agreement envisioned will never see the light of day.

And well over one-third of those facilities were intended for vulnerable neighbourhoods.

Neighbourhoods like Jane-Finch, where 30 per cent of the kids live below what's now called the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO). Neighbourhoods like Jamestown, where 34 per cent of the children live below LICO. Neighbourhoods like Steeles-Lamareaux, where more than half of the youngsters live with poverty.

Working families can't work without decent, licensed, non-profit child care.

My own children attended such facilities &mdash; first at our church and then in their school &mdash; where they were provided with early-learning opportunities at a very high standard. Every child in this city deserves to have the same opportunities.

The City of Toronto oversees the largest child-care system in the country outside of Quebec. We've been fighting hard for years to keep that system up and running.

We fought hardest when a former Ontario Conservative government cancelled funding that could have meant the closing of hundreds of child-care spaces that were about to open in schools across Toronto. They didn't close because the city somehow managed to pick up the tab.

But the city can't step in today. We just don't have the financial ability.

And this is why we all must do everything we can to persuade the new Parliament that previous federal-provincial agreements must continue. The future of Toronto and Canada's other major cities depend on it.

The Harper government intends to replace the \$5 billion child-care pact with an annual family allowance of \$1,200 for each child under the age of 6.

But this is not a child-care plan. It's an allowance for families with children to spend as they see fit.

In and of itself, this isn't necessarily a bad thing. Families can use the extra cash and will spend it wisely. However, this money comes nowhere close to covering the expense of quality child care.

In Toronto, the real cost to a family for a single child-care space is about \$10,000 annually. And the Conservative plan does nothing to increase choice for those looking for that space.

Furthermore, because the allowance will be taxed back from anyone with an income, the lowest amounts will go to families with modest incomes living close to the poverty line. The highest amounts will go to one-earner couples with incomes of \$100,000 or more.

Toronto is not alone with its concerns. A recent study of local child-care programs in 11 cities across Canada showed that &mdash; outside of Quebec &mdash; the percentage of children with access to child care ranged from a low of 6.7 per cent in Saskatoon to a high of 24.9 per cent in Whitehorse. Toronto came in at 13.6 per cent. With service levels this low, choice in child care does not exist for most Canadian families who want access to early learning in a regulated program.

This is not acceptable. And it speaks to the critical need for continued co-operation among all governments.

So much of what municipalities do revolves around the provision of services. Cities like Toronto cannot make up the shortfall of funds if the federal child-care money vanishes. There will be very real impacts on Toronto communities and the people who live here. Those blows will not be blunted by \$1,200 a year &mdash; before taxes.

\* David Miller is Mayor of Toronto.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7856> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/poverty> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federalism> [7]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/spaces> [8] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-programs> [9]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/urban>