

Child care system at issue in vote [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Two-year-old Daniella Quashie-Roy finally started the preschool program at Andrew Fleck Child Care Centre this week, after being on a waiting list for more than half her life.

Her mother, psychology student Jamie Quashie, was able to put off her studies at Carleton University and stay home with her until a subsidized space opened up.

But working parents may not have the luxury of waiting.

That's what happened to Caryn Dilawri, whose 10-month-old son has been on a list at the Kanata Research Park Family Centre since he was four weeks old; he has virtually no hope of getting in before his mother's planned return to work in April. Ms. Dilawri, who works in corporate marketing for Cognos, is considering taking a leave of absence or hiring a nanny while she waits to secure a toddler space that would cost her \$1,000 a month.

Ms. Quashie and Ms. Dilawri are the norm among parents looking for child care in Ottawa.

Statistics Canada population estimates for 2005 indicate there are 66,405 children aged six and under in Ottawa.

There are only about 15,200 licensed child-care spaces in the city, fewer than half of them subsidized.

Things could get even worse, say child-care advocates.

With polls showing the Conservatives in the lead days before Monday's federal election, families in Ottawa could soon feel the impact of a new government's child-care policy. Both future and existing licensed child-care spaces are potentially at risk, said Jane Joy, the city's manager of children's services.

Monica Lysack, executive director of the Ottawa-based Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, said people have reason to worry.

"I think we can assume that anything will be under threat," said Ms. Lysack, whose organization has released statements warning voters about the Tory child-care plan.

Tory leader Stephen Harper has said that, if elected, he will cancel the child-care deals the federal Liberal government signed last year with the provinces.

In place of the Liberals' national, licensed early-learning and child-care plan, Mr. Harper would give families \$1,200 a year in a taxable supplement for each child under six. The Conservatives have also promised to create 125,000 child-care spaces by giving employers and community groups a tax credit of \$10,000 per space.

The Conservative plan is "child care for people who don't believe in child care," said Minister of Social Development Ken Dryden, who launched the Liberal plan.

The Liberal plan is worth \$5 billion over five years and aims to develop a national system of licensed, regulated care.

The NDP has proposed a similar plan, which would be enshrined in a child-care act, enabling the federal government to monitor and enforce standards.

In the event of a Tory minority, Mr. Harper's proposed "choice in child care" would face strong opposition from the other major parties.

But the Conservative plan sounds good to Tammy Tyler, a nurse and mother of three in Barrhaven who works only one shift a week so that she or her husband can care for their children.

"We decided our priority was that we would be the ones to raise our children. And it's been a sacrifice, financially."

The Liberal plan, which is focused on licensed child care, is "not a universal plan" because it funds only one type of child care, said John Baird, Conservative candidate for Ottawa West-Nepean.

"It only supports 10 to 15 per cent of families. The Conservative plan supports every family."

Critics argue that \$1,200 annually doesn't go far and would only buy a month of care in an infant or toddler program.

Mr. Dryden said a Liberal government would eventually expand the system of regulated child care to include a large percentage of home-based care programs, which would benefit more Canadians. But critics say families currently using unlicensed care -- who are the majority -- don't get any help.

Whatever the shortcomings of the Liberal plan, a Conservative win is a troubling prospect for proponents of licensed child care.

Laurel Gibbons, NDP candidate for Nepean-Carleton -- a fast-growing part of the city with many young families -- said that while \$1,200 sounds good, the Tory plan "won't create one new child-care space."

Although the Conservative plan allows for tax incentives to encourage businesses and community organizations, Ms. Lysack noted that a similar program was tried in Ontario under Mike Harris's Conservative government, but didn't create any new spaces.

The expansion of licensed child care under way in Ottawa is being funded through Ontario's Best Start program, which could be in jeopardy if Mr. Harper fulfils his pledge to dismantle the Liberal plan (worth \$1.1 billion to Ontario over three years).

The first phase of the program is aimed, among other things, at expanding licensed child care mainly for four- and five-year-olds.

Ottawa's share of the Best Start money is \$50 million over three years. Ms. Joy said she expects to get another year of funding but, after that, it's "hard to say." This year's instalment of \$13 million has already been allocated. "It's in the bank," said Ms. Joy. "That's all we can count on."

The city has agreed to create 1,100 new spaces in the first two years of the Best Start funding, more than 700 of them by the end of March. Only 79 have been created so far, but the rest are well under way and Ms. Joy is confident they'll be ready by this summer.

Ms. Lysack, however, is not convinced that funding pre-existing the 2005 child-care deals is secure. "I think it's all at risk."

She hopes the provinces would continue to put money into licensed child care but notes that, historically, "the provinces have not had the resources or the interest, or both."

The Canada Social Transfer would be maintained under a Tory government, says Conservative spokeswoman Emma Welford. But "it's up to the provinces how they spend that money," she said.

Whatever the outcome of the election, Ms. Dilawri said she's already trying to get baby No. 2 on the waiting list at her day care of choice &em; even though she's only thinking about getting pregnant.

- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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