

Day care a big issue: Local operators choosing sides based on parties' approach [CA-AB]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A coalition of Peace Country child-care groups have launched an attack against the Conservatives' election platform, saying they believe it will seriously harm day cares in Canada.

But rookie Conservative candidate Chris Warkentin is standing strong against the opposition, claiming his party's platform provides the widest range of choice for Canadians.

The Day Care and Family Day Home Agencies association staged a small press conference last week to lay out their concerns. And while many in the group say they're not Liberal supporters, they're reluctantly throwing their votes behind that party and its vision of day care.

"It's not the party we're supporting, it's the plan," says Judy Farnsworth, one of the many day-care operators who says she plans to hold her nose when casting her ballot.

The Liberal government began allocating \$5 billion of five year's worth of funding this year by signing agreements with the provinces to provide subsidized care, mainly at established child-care programs.

In Alberta, with the combination of provincial and federal programs, a two-parent family earning \$39,000 a year with one infant and one preschool-aged child can receive a subsidy of \$1,075 a month.

The same family earning \$70,000 a year receives a subsidy of \$230 a month.

The day-care advocates also believe the current program will promote better staff at facilities, and help lead to the creation of more day care spaces.

Instead of subsidizing established programs or day-care spaces, the Conservative plan proposes to directly pay parents \$100 a month for every child under the age of six. Warkentin says it's the fairer way of helping child care.

In addition to the \$100 monthly payment, the Conservative party is proposing to spend \$250 million a year to help build more day-care space. Warkentin defends his plan, saying at its core, it's not about creating government spaces.

"The Liberal plan doesn't target lower- or middle-income families, it targets whoever can access their programs. That includes people who live near their sponsored programs, people who can get through the bureaucracy and mostly urban or densely-populated areas."

Grande Prairie has an estimated 530 day-care spaces, and the local operators say they want a government plan that will focus on building more.

They estimate the city needs an additional 500 child-care spaces, saying they're all maxed out. That doesn't include space needed in the rural areas.

"I get 70 calls a day looking for space," says Louise Sheppard, executive director of the Stepping Stones Day Care and Early Childhood Resource Centre. "It (Conservative plan) is still only \$100 and right now my low-income families are still getting \$500."

The day-care operators worry about how a lack of space is forcing families to make choices they don't want to. Parents are being forced to stay home to raise children, when they might prefer to be working.

The NDP platform proposes spending \$1.8 billion next year with a target of creating 200,000 publicly run day-care spaces across Canada, with annual increases of \$250 million a year.

It also includes provisions to raise child tax credit limits. Susan Thompson lives outside Peace River and is the only candidate with preschool-aged children, having two daughters aged 5 and 4.

She says just running in the election is an exercise in finding child care, with only one day care in Peace River.

She also attacked the Conservative plan, saying having choice doesn't mean much if there's no space for her children and says the Liberals have a broken track record on child care.

"It (Conservatives' \$1,200/year) doesn't do me any good if I can't get into the day care. Liberal promises are Liberal promises. They've been breaking promises for 12 years. More NDP MPs will keep the Liberals accountable."

- reprinted from the Grande Prairie Daily Herald-Tribune

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