

Tory day care proposal draws mixed reviews: Some Calgary moms like current system [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Choice in child care for a mother like Sherry Soong comes down to a single option: day care.

"This is pretty much it," Soong said as she picked up her four-year-old daughter, Kelly, at the Mayland Heights Child Care Centre Monday evening.

Soong, 19, works full-time during the day as a server, and said she has no other family members who are able to take care of Kelly during the day.

A \$5-billion deal reached between the federal government and the provinces in the fall means Soong qualifies for a subsidy and pays only \$75 a month to send her daughter to day care.

A child-care proposal unveiled Monday by Conservative Leader Stephen Harper would give \$1,200 to parents for each child under six to spend on child care as they see fit. The five-year, \$10.9-billion plan would also make \$250 million available annually to help employers and community groups create day-care spaces.

It's not clear if Soong's \$500-a-month provincial subsidy would remain intact if the Conservatives are elected and Harper scraps the Liberals' agreement. Even if it did, the young mom said she doesn't like the fact the Tory plan doesn't promise additional money for the existing day-care system.

"The \$1,200 is not going to improve the day cares or the meals or the knowledge of the staff," she said.

In Alberta, the provincial government used money it got under the day-care deal to increase funding for day-care programs, staff wages and staff training.

Like Soong, single mom Kim Ouellette said her family circumstances meant putting her two preschoolers in day care was the only option that allowed her to work during the day.

Ouellette, 27, said it's important any plan keeps day care affordable because there's little alternative for people in her circumstances, who need to work -- and want to work -- to get by.

A key premise of the Conservatives' plan is that willing employers accessing the \$250-million-a-year investment program will create a total of 125,000 new day-care spaces over the five-year life of the program.

One analyst, however, said the projection is optimistic and the result may be far fewer new day-care spaces than if the Liberal plan is allowed to remain in place.

"What businesses are going to take advantage of that?" asked Bill Moore-Kilgannon, executive director of Edmonton-based Public Interest Alberta.

If the Conservatives are interested in creating choice, Moore-Kilgannon added, the party should also propose legislative changes, such as longer paid parental leave.

"The whole framework of it around choice is, frankly, questionable. There's nothing I can see in this policy that talks about changing labour standards or policies," he said.

"It's good politics, but it doesn't build up a quality child-care system."

Representatives of the day-care industry said the \$5-billion Liberal program has increased access to the system and ensures all children in it are cared for and learning in an environment that is subject to rules and standards.

"I don't think (Harper's) addressed how he's going to maintain quality, maintain access or maintain early childhood development," said

Tanya Szarko, spokeswoman for the Day Care Society of Alberta.

The provincial government, meanwhile, refused to predict what implications the Conservative proposal would have for day-care funding in Alberta.

"For now, what we're doing is business as usual," Children's Services spokeswoman Jody Korchinski said.

- reprinted from the Calgary Herald

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