

Day care deal with Ottawa "imminent" [CA-BC] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

British Columbia is poised to become the seventh province to sign on to Ottawa's national child care program amid grumbling from advocates here that there is no big plan for the multimillion-dollar cash infusion.

"A deal is, I would say, imminent," said Jamie Tomlinson, a spokesman for federal Social Development Minister Ken Dryden, adding he expects the minister to travel to B.C. "very soon," to sign a deal with provincial counterparts.

Mr. Tomlinson said the B.C. deal will be similar to agreements forged earlier this year with Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland.

B.C. is slated to receive up to \$92-million this year out of a \$700-million fund set aside for all provinces and territories.

Over the next five years, the province will receive \$633-million all told out of Ottawa's \$5-billion child care budget.

However, news that a deal is about to happen here has been greeted with skepticism from some B.C. child care advocates who complain the provincial Liberal government has no plan for the federal money and has refused to meet with advocates to develop one.

"It's a huge worry for advocates that there isn't a plan," said Sharon Gregson, a spokeswoman for the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C.

Right now, there are about 77,058 child care spaces in B.C. and less than 15 per cent of B.C. children under 13 are in daycare.

Costs can run from \$850 to \$1,000 a month for one child under three years of age.

In the long term, B.C. advocates are seeking provincial legislation to set up a public child care plan similar to the public education system.

Ms. Gregson said the current number of spaces in the province only provide spaces for 12 per cent of B.C. children under the age of 12.

As well, the coalition wants the federal money to be used to expand a network of regulated child care centres. "Daycares should not be money-making institutions," she said.

"There's a concern about the big-box operators that are coming up from the United States," she said. "They eat up the smaller stand-alone centres."

Stephanie Seaman, a child care supervisor at a Vancouver centre, said salaries for child care professionals are also a concern. Right now, wages are "all over the map" in B.C., ranging from \$21 to \$25 an hour in the Lower Mainland area to \$8 an hour in northern communities.

Under the various agreements already signed between Ottawa and six provinces, the provinces have been granted leeway on how to spend the child care funds.

In July, Alberta signed on after it secured a guarantee that it could use the federal money for either commercial or non-profit centres.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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