

Ontario to provide 25,000 new day care spaces [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

About 25,000 new licensed day-care spaces will be opened in Ontario over the next three years with some of the new spots available as early as September, the province announced today.

The funds to cover the new day-care spaces come from Ottawa, as part of a five-year, \$5-billion national child-care plan unveiled by the federal government in its February budget.

Ontario has been promised \$1.9 billion for child care and early learning programs by 2010. Of that amount, \$1.1 billion will be used by the province to create the 25,000 new spaces by March 2008, as well as to attract and retain child-care workers and cover universal newborn screening.

About \$106 million will be spent to give wage raises for child-care workers.

Chambers said the new spaces come on top of more than 4,000 subsidized day-care spaces created in Ontario in its 2004-05 fiscal year. The province had nearly 124,500 day care spots last year.

The Ontario program is being rolled out less than six weeks before the new school year, and Chambers admits the mid-summer announcement means municipalities will be anxious to get new day-care spaces assured for their regions. Materials will be shipped to municipalities giving them criteria to apply for new spaces but Chambers doesn't expect they'll be returned to the province for review until the end of October.

There's also pressure to make proper use of the nearly \$280 million that Ottawa has earmarked for Ontario child care in the current fiscal year, which ends next March. The federal government is holding that amount in trust and spending it as required.

As part of the federal-provincial deal, municipal costs on the new child-care funding will be waived, beginning in 2005-06 through 2009-10. Chambers said this move will save municipalities more than \$208 million over the next three years.

Traditionally, municipalities had to contribute some 20 per cent towards licensed child-care costs in their communities, said Pat Vanini, executive director of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario.

Vanini urged Chambers and Dryden to work together to "find a way to fund this program well beyond its current timeframe."

The Ontario money goes to licensed day-care centres but NDP critic Andrew Howarth feels the funds should be earmarked specifically to non-profit child-care facilities, not private "big-box" operators who may not pass along the subsidies to parents.

"By allowing these dollars to flow to private operators the floodgates will open to big box commercial day-care operators, who will drive prices up and quality down," Howarth said.

Chambers noted that when it comes to expansion projects, the province will cover costs for non-profit child-care operators only.

Chambers also said Ontario prefers the subsidy formula to the \$7-a-day child-care program Quebec uses to cover about half the province's children aged six and younger. Quebec spends \$1.5 billion a year to offer that program.

- reprinted from the Canadian Press

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