

Day care deal bails out parents: 'It's like a second mortgage,' dad says of costs [CA-AB] ^[1]

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Source: Calgary Herald

Format: Article

Publication Date: 8 Jul 2005

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

Facing a monthly child care bill of \$1,400, Calgaryan Ralph Kroll hopes a new day care agreement between the province and Ottawa will give parents a financial boost.

"It's like a second mortgage," said Kroll, whose two children attend Bow Valley Child Care Centre in downtown Calgary. "It would be nice to get some support."

On Thursday, Alberta and the federal government announced a five-year, \$490-million agreement in principle on child care.

Yet it isn't clear whether the cash will be spent on subsidizing day care costs for parents like Kroll or on other initiatives such as increasing the number of spaces and improving wages for workers.

Heather Forsyth, provincial Children's Services minister, said she is holding province-wide consultations on what changes the child care system requires before releasing a plan in the coming months.

Thursday's deal follows a report last month that found Alberta spends less per child on day care than any other province.

The new agreement met with mixed reaction across the province.

Parents such as Joyce and Joe Lokanc said the government should use the cash to enhance the quality of Alberta's day cares, which are "operating on a shoestring."

Advocates such as Public Interest Alberta urged the province to assist low-income families with bigger subsidies and build a larger, not-for-profit, day care system, given that the majority of operators are private.

The provincial NDP called on Forsyth to conduct in-depth consultations on developing a day care plan.

"We don't need any more loaded online questionnaires that are passed off as consultation," NDP MLA Ray Martin said in a statement.

Forsyth signed the deal with federal Social Development Minister Ken Dryden following months of difficult negotiations that, at times, descended into verbal sparring.

Alberta said it was reluctant to sign onto a national deal due to concerns about a requirement to report outcomes from child care programs to Ottawa.

The province also wanted flexibility to spend the federal cash on either private or not-for-profit day care operators. The minister even mused about giving money to individuals who want to stay home and care for their children.

Thursday's deal would allow Alberta to support either for-profit or not-for-profit caregivers, but the operators must be regulated day care centres.

The federal cash couldn't be spent to support stay-at-home parents, although the province could use its own funds for that option.

- reprinted from the Calgary Herald

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