

Rural child care advocates buoyed ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Tricia Livingston knew she'd have to go back to work after her son was born, but the Miami-based mom wasn't worried where she'd leave him.

In 2000, Miami Children's Facility Inc. opened with room for six infants and 22 children. She'd been one of the volunteers in the small southern Manitoba community that had worked to see the facility built. Livingston now drops off five-year old Tyler, who attends kindergarten on alternate days, and her two-year old daughter.

She could have been scrambling, says Livingston. Miami's program was built because so many parents in the area were without care for their kids. They were always moving them between homes of friends and relatives who could look after them. "It was just a daily shuffle for a lot of people," she says.

Livingston says she hopes more communities will get the child care programming they need. The federal budget announcements in February included an allocation of \$5 billion over five years for a national child care program. Manitoba is expected to receive about \$180 million as their portion over that time, including \$25 million to be allocated to a trust for this fiscal year.

Livingston shares with many the hope that there'll be more resources around to address a specific challenge - the need for child care in rural Manitoba.

The province has said on several occasions that it's committed to its own action plan for expanding child care services, which includes expanding the number of day care spaces across the entire province. Rural child care advocates say a closer look at rural child care is needed, as are policies that will work for rural child care programs.

"Child care is pretty much seen and delivered on urban policies and seen as an urban service," says Jane Wilson, a spokesperson for Rural Voices, an advocacy group that helps rural communities learn from each others' experiences setting up care programs. Wilson worked to establish the Langruth Children's Centre and has worked to develop the idea of a so-called "integrated hub model" or small rural communities sharing resources to offer child care.

Five years ago, a survey by the province solicited some 700 responses from rural families saying they needed child care services. "That to me, says there's a need," says Wilson "I know it hasn't improved that much."

Rural Voices has just released a discussion document on provision of rural child care and is hoping to solicit comment from rural Manitobans later this month.

Wilson says rural communities themselves need to start organizing and deciding what they specifically need. "It has to be community-driven, and community-based," she says.

Donna Riddell, executive director of the Miami Children's Facility agrees, but says it can be really difficult for small communities to get started. It took Miami a year and a half to get their program in place, and funding secured for it, and that took many hours of volunteers committed to getting the program going. "It's difficult for small communities to build and develop a program like this because they don't have the volunteer resources to be able to go forth and do it," she said.

One benefit of new federal funding for child care could be more staffing within Manitoba's child care system, who could then lend more support to rural areas trying to set up programs, she said. But lack of human resources to start is just one stumbling block. Even committed groups find their small towns often don't have the physical space to house a program, given strict building codes, and there's little capital funding around to build anything. Manitoba's shortage of early child care educators is also felt acutely in the countryside and funding structures for child care also are problematic for rural areas.

The big challenge is to keep staff they have when the need for care fluctuates throughout the year. Day cares in Manitoba are funded according to utilization, or spaces filled and used. But that usage varies in the countryside.

"Spring and fall are tremendously busy, but we're a little slower in the winter and summer," says Riddell. "We have to average that (funding) out to be able to get the maximum operating grant to be able to keep staff through the peaks and valleys."

Licensing regulations also frown on multi-age groupings of children, but it's impossible to expect a small program to find and retain staff persons for each age group, when there may be a smaller number per group. It's in those areas that day care policy needs to recognize the unique needs of programs in rural areas, Riddell said.

Yet despite hurdles more programs are starting. Wilson says she's "totally and completely optimistic" that more rural child care, geared specifically to rural communities' needs will be established. She's buoyed by the support organizations like the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association (CASA), Keystone Agricultural Producers (KAP) and the Manitoba Milk Producers have lent recently in resolutions calling for rural child care programs as a farm safety measure. Organizations like hers have pushed for years "that farm safety and rural child care should become synonymous," Wilson said. "I think there's a lot more public awareness of the fact that we don't want our kids being hurt and killed on farms anymore. There's also been a whole lot of work done on how good-quality care is just good for kids," she said.

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