

\$5 billion put into day care despite lack of spending plan: Alberta unsure what to do with cash [CA-AB] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS Calgary day cares aren't banking on their share of a \$700-million cheque for national child care in the federal budget, saying they need details on the proposed program and how funds will be spent. Wednesday's budget allocated cash for a much-anticipated Canada-wide child care program -- \$5 billion over five years, including \$700 million for the provinces to spend in 2005. Yet, without an agreement on the national child care initiative, which Ottawa unsuccessfully tried to broker with provinces earlier this month, the budget was short on details about the proposed program. Local day cares -- and even Alberta politicians -- were left with unanswered questions about how the budgeted cash will be spent. "I'm very excited about idea of the national program," said Tanya Szarko, spokeswoman for the Day Care Society of Alberta. "But there needs to be a clear standard on where funds are going. I wouldn't want to see funds allocated to unlicensed programs." Despite some criticism, child care advocates also praised federal Finance Minister Ralph Goodale's budget for following through on Ottawa's pledge to allocate \$5 billion in funds for the proposed program over five years. In 2005, while federal-provincial negotiations on the program continue, \$700 million will be available to the provinces on a per-capita basis "as they require." The money will be paid into a third-party trust. It isn't clear how Alberta will spend its share of the cash. Alberta Children's Services Minister Heather Forsyth said she needs clarification from federal Social Development Minister Ken Dryden about how the \$700 million can be spent. "We need to understand how they see the money flowing," she said. Earlier this month, Forsyth refused to sign on to Dryden's national childcare proposal during federal-provincial talks in Vancouver, saying the initiative should be more flexible in allowing parents to choose the type of day care they prefer. Forsyth also wanted guarantees Ottawa will fund the national program after its five-year commitment. On Wednesday, she said her position hadn't changed. "The program should offer parents choice and flexibility, whether it's not-for-profit or for-profit, whether they choose to a day care or day home," said Forsyth. Some in Calgary's day care community agreed the cash should simply be handed over to lower- and middle-income families to subsidize child care costs at licensed facilities. Georgina Leimert of Mount Royal Day Care suggested some funds might also go to upgrading day cares and paying for more staff training. Leimert said it shouldn't pay for parents to stay at home and take care of their children themselves. "I'm wondering where is this money supposed to go," she said. "The government hasn't said." The \$5-billion child care investment also includes \$100 million to develop early childhood programs on First Nations reserves. Moreover, government proposed \$120 million over five years to improve an existing on-reserve special education program for First Nations children. - reprinted from the Calgary Herald

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