

Canadian child-care spaces in short supply ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Seventy percent of the 500,000 Canadian children under the age of 12 have mothers who work and who need child care.

Yet there are only enough licenced child-care spaces for 12 percent of them. The spaces range from a low of four percent of what's needed in Saskatchewan to a high of 21 percent in Quebec, the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada told MPs at a hearing in September.

The cost of child care is the biggest obstacle to creating more spaces, the group said. That leads parents to use unregulated spots, friends or family, rather than provincially licenced centres with staff trained in early childhood development.

The lack of money in this field was noted in a report released last month by Rural Voices, a federally funded project that is researching rural child care in Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

One of the authors, Jane Wilson, was for the past 14 years the director of a centre in Langruth, Man., that grew into five child-care centres in rural Manitoba. Now working as a consultant on rural child care, Wilson and her research partner Carol Gott found that child-care centres resented the effects of provincial government subsidies. While the subsidies enabled more parents to place their children in care, the paperwork required was onerous, rigid and sometimes embarrassing.

"Keeping track of all the rules, chasing bad debts from parents, letting parents know when they need to come into the program to make minimum hour targets and getting parent signatures each month takes a lot of time away from programming," said the Rural Voices report, which based its findings on interviews this past year with rural child-care providers and parents.

The report suggested the subsidy system would work better if the centres received the money rather than parents, who have to regularly file pay stubs to prove their right to a subsidy.

Even when centres get grants, the rules are set up for an urban setting. Rural centres, dealing with smaller groups of kids and several ages in each, have problems with budgeting since each age draws a different allocation of money. Also, the required hours of operation don't provide the seasonal flexibility needed for farm work.

The money issue spills over into the training for child-care staff. Since workers don't get paid much above minimum wage, there is little incentive to take courses. "The hiring process for some centres is to find someone who is suitable for 'this kind' of work and then try to get him/her trained while he/she is working," Rural Voices said.

Low salaries and a lack of benefits lead to high turnover. Rural Voices suggested government could help by offering forgivable loans, similar to what is given doctors or nurses who commit to working in rural areas.

Other areas highlighted in the report include the difficulty in finding parents willing to serve on the centres' volunteer boards and the need to incorporate farm safety into the child-care centres' programs.

- reprinted from the Western Producer

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