

Ottawa, provinces sign day-care deal: 50,000 new spots over five years, \$900M program 'essential first step' ^[1]

Author: Lawton, Valerie

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EXCERPTS

A new \$900 million national child-care deal will mean tens of thousands of new day-care spots across Canada - but it will be a few years before parents actually start to see shorter waiting lists for spaces.

Federal, provincial and territorial ministers reached the five-year accord yesterday after weeks of wrangling over how provinces should be allowed to use the money.

"This is the beginning of a very solid national day-care program for Canadians," federal Human Resources Minister Jane Stewart said as the meeting ended.

The Liberals first promised to set up a child-care program a decade ago - making it a key plank of their 1993 election campaign.

Activists who have been pressing the government to make good on the commitment in the years that followed described the deal as a modest, albeit very welcome, start.

"This historic agreement among all government leaders will give parents hope," said Laurel Rothman of Campaign 2000, a group fighting child poverty. "We're not there yet but it's the essential first step."

Day-care advocates are disappointed that the \$900 million will be rolled out slowly.

Provinces and territories will share just \$25 million this coming year and \$75 million in the second year.

Behind closed doors, provincial social services ministers also pressed the federal government to get the money flowing more quickly.

Ontario's Brenda Elliott said afterwards that the province won't be able to do much with initial funding.

"It's important to understand that expectations can't be over the moon, that this is going to be a long-term effort," she said at the close of negotiations at a hotel at Pearson International Airport.

She said the province's piece of the first-year funding is equal to only about 1 per cent of what the province already spends on child care annually.

For Toronto's long waiting lists, "it will make a very modest difference," said Elliott.

After five years, the agreement could mean 50,000 new subsidized child-care spaces across the country, including 20,000 in Ontario. In Toronto- where 15,000 children are on waiting lists for subsidized spots- the new funding may eventually create 4,000 to 6,000 spots.

The exact numbers will depend on how the provinces decide to use the cash. It can be used on everything from capital and operating funding for child-care centres to fee subsidies, training and wage increases for caregivers.

The deal requires provinces to report publicly on where the money goes and what impact it has on affordability and the number of spaces made available.

The key sticking point in negotiations between Ottawa and Queen's Park had been over Stewart's demand that the money be used only to create regulated child-care spots.

Ontario argued that wouldn't offer parents enough flexibility, suggesting money should be directed at more informal arrangements such as in-home care.

Their differences were settled by adding a few words to the accord stipulating the federal funds will be used to improve access to child-care programs regulated by the provinces and territories.

Provinces will also be required to monitor standards under the accord.

"Ontario's concern was that we were perhaps moving into a one-size-fits-all program and we were very concerned about that because we believe that flexibility is important and that parents are best able to choose what kind of child-care arrangements they want," said Elliott.

But Stewart insisted Ottawa had never planned to take over the provinces' responsibility for regulating child care.

Asked if Ontario had blinked in the negotiations, she smiled.

"Nothing changed," the minister said. "I've always known that the provinces and territories are the regulators."

Elliott said Ontario still hasn't decided how it will spend the new money, or whether current regulations would apply to the child-care spaces that receive financial support.

Day-care activists who listened to her comments at a news conference said they fear the province will change its child-care regulations that govern issues such as health and safety.

"My biggest concern is the evasive answer given by the minister on regulation. It will mean that we will constantly have to watch out to make sure that they don't water down the regulations," said Cheryl De Gras of the Ontario Coalition for Better Childcare.

De Gras said her group's efforts to try to convince Ottawa to put more money into the new program will begin immediately. "It's a small amount. We've got a lot of work to do but advocates have been looking for a national program for 20 years, so this is a beginning."

Toronto Councillor Olivia Chow, the city's advocate for children, also said she'll be pushing for more.

"Now we need a plan for a national, high-quality child-care program for our children with substantial investments, that's the key thing," she said.

- reprinted from The Toronto Star

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