

Another tantalizing promise of a day-care program. But advocates wary of new plan: Previous pledges have been broken [CA] ^[1]

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Parents show up unannounced at the McMurrich Sprouts Day Care almost daily - desperately searching for an elusive space for their little ones.

There are 300 kids on the list, three times the total number of spaces at the day care, considered one of the best in the city.

Many of the children haven't even been born yet and, instead of a name, "To Be Announced" is written on the application form. Some parents-to-be rush in when their in-utero babies are the size of peas, hoping they're quick enough to snag one of only 10 particularly prized infant spots.

Myers has been working in child care for 25 years and says there have always been more people looking for spaces than actual spaces available, but the situation today is worse than she's ever seen.

She's one of the legions of Canadians who have protested, carried placards and organized campaigns to press for a national day-care program.

They've felt close to making it happen a few times over the last couple of decades only to have their hopes dashed at the last minute.

For many, the government's commitment in this week's budget to spend millions on day care fell short of expectations and was yet another disappointment.

Activists are left wondering: When will Canada have a national day-care program?

The federal government says it will spend \$935 million over the next five years to help create new day-care spaces across the country.

Activists were delighted- until they read the fine print in the budget. The money is back-loaded so only \$25 million will flow in the first year, \$75 million in the second.

As well, the federal government has not yet reached an agreement with the provinces and territories. Ontario is already complaining that Ottawa isn't being flexible enough about how the money can be spent.

Day-care advocates say they've learned to be cynical after so many years of broken promises. But they say they will press the provinces to reach an agreement with Ottawa, and then they will start pushing for more money.

Three times before - in 1984, 1986 and 1995 - federal governments announced, with great fanfare, that a national strategy on child care would be developed. Those who were just babies when Ottawa first began talking seriously about a national program are now university-age.

Former Liberal prime minister Pierre Trudeau launched the first attempt in 1984, setting up a task force to examine the federal role in creating a system of quality care in Canada.

By the time the task force released its recommendations on funding a day-care system in 1986, a Conservative government was in power. The report was quickly shelved.

But Brian Mulroney's Tory government had set up its own committee to look at child care before the Trudeau task force had finished its work.

On the eve of the 1988 election campaign, the House of Commons passed legislation to create 400,000 day-care spaces over seven years at a cost of \$4 billion, but the bill failed to make it through the Senate. The Tories repeated their day-care promise during the election campaign, but four years later the Tory plan was officially dead.

"Child care is now considered a last priority," then-health minister Benoit Bouchard announced in 1992. Activists felt blindsided by the about-face and were further shocked when Bouchard compared the move with an earlier decision to slash VIA Rail: "I have the privilege, as I had with VIA Rail a couple of years ago, to be the killer."

Child-care lobbyists barely had time to get over their bitter disappointment when day care jumped back onto the national agenda the following year.

This time it was via Jean Chretien's Liberals' 1993 Red Book of election promises, which included a commitment to create 150,000 child-care spaces over three years.

After sweeping to power in the election that year, the Liberals began work on fulfilling the promise, which was contingent on a cost-sharing deal with the provinces and sufficient economic growth. But the Liberals' interest soon waned as their attention turned to the country's economic woes and the threat of Quebec separation.

Then came the 1995 budget, which dramatically slashed transfer payments to the provinces. Not surprisingly, the premiers were suddenly a lot less keen on picking up part of the tab for a national day-care program.

Talks between the two levels of government limped along under then-human resources minister Lloyd Axworthy, but soon after he was replaced with the more conservative Doug Young, federal officials began whispering about an "exit strategy."

Day care was dead again, with the Liberals blaming the provinces for a lack of interest.

"After the Axworthy and Young period, you could not say the c-word on Parliament Hill," remembers Laurel Rothman, a long-time day-care advocate and national director of Campaign 2000, a group fighting child poverty.

She recalls one meeting where a senior ministerial policy aide warned: "You can't say 'child care' around here. Call it something else."

"It's very hard to keep going on all of this stuff," says Rothman, who is also a director of the Family Services Association of Toronto.

Rothman began fighting for day care in the 1970s, when her own children were small, and says she's watched the battleground shift over the decades.

In the early days, she and other activists were forced to counter arguments that women belonged at home with their children, not at the office. That became less of an issue as working outside the home became the norm, rather than the exception.

In the '90s, Rothman says, the federal government's argument was that national child care was unaffordable in an era of recession, deficits and program cuts. Child-care groups countered that spending on child care actually saves money by reducing other costs, such as welfare.

Rothman and others advocates wonder how far the federal government's latest effort on child care will go.

The fact that child care is shown as a line item in a federal budget is historic, they say, but they want the money to flow more quickly and fear that federal-provincial negotiations may fail.

Martha Friendly, a University of Toronto professor who has extensively researched and written about child-care issues, was near tears on budget day during a live television interview in a day-care centre, trying to find her words in reaction to the funding announcement.

"Starting with \$25 million is so meagre," says Friendly, of the university's Childcare Resource and Research Unit. "To put it in perspective, there's an item in the budget called School Net (a program to connect schools to the Internet) that's \$30 million this year."

She adds: "Everybody says this is a people's budget and all that sort of thing. ... This is a big-spending budget and the provinces were almost all on board. Why is there only \$25 million in the first year and why is there only \$75 million in the second year?"

Advocates for national day care fear that such a small amount of cash up front won't do much to entice the provinces into signing a new child-care deal.

Even before the money was announced, Queen's Park was grumbling about Ottawa's insistence that it be used for creating regulated day-care spaces rather than to fund more informal arrangements, such as in-home care. The province's participation remains a question mark.

Cheryl DeGras, executive director of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, says the federal government must stick to its guns on the issue of regulation and withhold the money if the province doesn't agree.

"We eat regulated chickens, for goodness' sake," DeGras says.

"We are entrusting a very valuable resource into a situation that influences their lives greatly, and regulation is something that is necessary to give parents the peace of mind they need to be able to go into the workforce and have the confidence to know their children are being well cared for."

Human Resources Minister Jane Stewart isn't saying what she'd do if Ontario continues to balk at a regulated care scheme.

The minister has won fans in the activist community for her dogged efforts to convince cabinet colleagues to invest in day care. And while Stewart says the Liberals have now lived up to their 1993 promise, she concedes more must be done.

"I would say it does take us to fulfilling that essence (of the Red Book)," she says. "It's not going to be enough and I'm looking forward to continuing to build on it. But I think we've come a long way in the last few years."

Stewart says the funding will flow slowly at first because it will take time to reach an agreement and for the provinces to get structures in place to divvy up the money.

But Olivia Chow, a day-care champion on Toronto council, says the federal cash will have a laughably small impact in Toronto over the next few years.

"When we saw \$25 million and the provinces have to agree, I thought, 'Oh, here we go again,'" Chow says.

She's calculated that Toronto's share of \$25 million equals roughly 260 spaces, which won't put much of a dent in the city's day-care waiting list of 15,000 names. This year alone, the city is losing more than 1,800 spots because of provincial funding cuts, bringing the space available to about 45,000, the lowest level since 1992.

Chow's estimates suggest Toronto could eventually see 25,000 new day-care spaces under the federal program- if all goes well. But she's skeptical.

"I don't know what I've been doing for the last 10 years. It's like one step forward, six steps back. That's my decade of ... I don't even know how to describe it- a decade of feeling there is hope, and then all the hope dashed again."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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