

Stewart wins funding commitment for child care and compassionate leave [CA] ^[1]

Author: Greenaway, Norma

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EXCERPTS

The federal government is poised to unveil a budget Tuesday that will earmark at least \$1 billion in multi-year funding to boost the number of quality, regulated child-care spots across the country and to help finance compassionate leave for Canadians looking after gravely ill family members.

The new funds for child care and palliative leave are a victory for Human Resources Minister Jane Stewart, who appeared to be celebrating early Thursday with a much-publicized visit to an Ottawa day-care centre.

Oozing confidence, Stewart posed for the cameras while chatting, arm-wrestling and attending a tea party with toddlers and pre-schoolers. All the while, a beaming Stewart insisted to reporters she couldn't possibly discuss what is in the budget John Manley will deliver Tuesday in the Commons.

Stewart said, however, said she is working "aggressively" with her provincial and territorial counterparts to come up with an effective plan to "increase the numbers of child-care spaces and early learning opportunities for Canadian children."

Sources said the budget's emphasis on expanding the pool of quality child-care spaces stems from the federal government's desire to target the money rather than allow the provinces to spend it as they see fit on everything from sexual abuse counselling to pre-natal care.

Ottawa is set to add up to \$1 billion over the next three to five years to a \$2.2-billion, five-year fund it began dispersing to the provinces in 2001 for unspecified early childhood development programs.

This time, however, the money would be dedicated to increasing the number of regulated child-care slots. There are some provincial objections, led by Ontario, to having strings attached to the money, but Stewart appears adamant.

"I think there is something that is very clear," she said. "Across the country there is an increased need - it's not an increased need - it has been there for too long for regulated quality care opportunities," she said.

A national study released earlier this week backed Stewart's position. It said there has been an alarming deterioration in the availability of quality child care outside of Quebec where residents have access to \$5-a-day child care. Among other things, it found there has been a dramatic decline in the growth of new child-care spaces in the other parts of the country.

The study, by the University of Toronto's Childcare Resource and Research Unit, said only 65,340 new spaces were created between 1992 and 2001, compared with the 160,000 between 1980 and 1990.

On compassionate leave, sources expect the budget will lay out plans to use the well-heeled employment insurance fund to finance at least six weeks of leave - after a two-week waiting period - for people providing end-of-life care.

Stewart has been an advocate of a compassionate leave program that would provide income security and job protection for a limited period. At the day-care centre, she called it "another piece of the overarching family/children policy" the Chretien government is pursuing.

The concept of using the EI fund was agreed to by Prime Minister Jean Chretien, the premiers and territorial leaders in their recent five-year accord to renew the health-care system. Ottawa promised to help fund the compassionate leave plan out of \$1.6 billion it has set aside over the next five years for such things as patient safety and a national immunization strategy.

In the health accord, the federal government committed to changing the Canada Labor Code to provide job protection during compassionate leave, and the provinces are expected to follow suit. The plan is modeled on the use of EI funds to finance maternity and parental benefits.

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