

Project invests in workers and kids with special needs [CA]^[1]

Author: Henderson, Helen

Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 24 Jan 2003

AVAILABILITY

See text in DESCRIPTION FIELD below.

EXCERPTS

Next time you hear government bragging about the so-called "trickle-down," long-term benefits of tax cuts amid underfunded social programs, ask why no one in power ever seems to listen to the other side of the argument.

For what seems like centuries, the families of children with disabilities have pointed out that increasing spending on programs to help disabled kids reach their potential pays off big-time down the road.

The trickle-down, long-term economic benefits: children who have a chance of becoming more independent, and parents whose stress levels are reduced, cutting the risk of costly, long-term health problems and reducing the taxpayer's burden.

Anyone who needs proof of the benefits of increased funding need look no further than an innovative program at Canada Post.

Bankrolled by the corporation, developed and co-ordinated by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, the special-needs project helps parents pay for extra costs related to children's disabilities. It also offers families support and advice by phone, points them in the direction of community resources, improves their advocacy skills and keeps them in touch with each other through a regular newsletter.

Eight years into the project:

93 per cent of parents say it has reduced over-all family stress levels.

99 per cent say it has reduced financial stress.

81 per cent feel it has improved their morale and effectiveness at work.

Like other eligible members of CUPW, Holmes and her school-age family can get up to \$100 a month from September to June to help meet extra expenses, such as child care or respite fees, a support worker to help a child participate in a community program, training for a child-care worker, special transportation costs or medical equipment and supplies not covered by standard health insurance.

In July and August, when children are out of school and child-care costs rise, they can get up to \$200 a month. Families with preschoolers who are in child care at least 25 hours a week can get up to \$200 a month year 'round.

Family Place Resource Centre, a federally funded, non-profit organization based in Cape Breton, administers the project. The Union of Postal and Communications Employees has a similar program.

The need for a special-needs program became clear back in the '80s, when a joint Canada Post/CUPW survey of employee child-care needs showed "a significant number" of the spouses of union members who had children with disabilities were either unemployed, underemployed or worked only part-time because of the demands the child's disabilities made on the family.

The union knew postal workers' shifts make finding child care a challenge at the best of times. The difficulty of finding good care, coupled with the extra costs of health supplies and transportation, took a toll on employees.

Parents of kids with special needs also found themselves resented at work because their family needs often made them late or absent. Many lived in fear of losing their jobs.

In 1996, a special-needs pilot project became one of 12 programs funded by the CUPW Child Care Fund. Since then, the idea has grown. As stipulated in the most recent union contract, Canada Post puts \$250,000 into the Child Care Fund every three months. Helping families with special needs is an important part of the fund's work, says Ottawa-based child-care co-ordinator Jamie Kass.

Among participants, 80 per cent say the additional support they've been able to afford has helped their child's language, academic and recreational skills; 90 per cent say their child is happier and has more self-esteem.

In fact, Kass says, the work done so far has been so successful, everyone is pulling for it to be expanded. It's hoped that in future it will also provide help for adult children with special needs, who are cut off from many programs after age 19, and aid employees who are caring for an ill parent or spouse.

Meantime, Kass is helping to spread the word to other unions, companies and communities.

This week, she was in Winnipeg, introducing a book the union has published on the project. Moving Mountains: Work, Family And Children With Special Needs came out last month, to great reviews in Ottawa at a national round table on children with disabilities, Kass says.

"We did the book to get the story out."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star.

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