

Parents send diapers to MLAs: Unusual protest is sparked by changes in B.C.'s child care [CA-BC] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Parents worried about provincial government budget cuts to four unionized child-care centres have found a novel way to express their disappointment.

The parents are sending clean diapers along with letters of concern to Lynn Stephens, the minister of community, aboriginal and women's services, in the hope of attracting at least some attention to their plight.

"We've tried everything," parent Shannon Wishloff said Thursday. "We've sent letters to the MLAs and the premier, and we've had little or no response at all.

"So we decided it was time to try something a little more creative, and that's why we came up with diapers. Diapers are a universal representation of a child," said Wishloff, a New Westminster resident whose 15-month-old son Nathan attends the Fair Haven Children's Centre operated by the Burnaby Association for Community Inclusion.

Last month, just one week before Christmas, BACI learned its four child-care centres were facing a \$400,000 funding shortfall because of a massive government realignment of child-care services.

While many unlicensed and family-run day cares across B.C. will now receive government funding for the first time, BACI is getting a major funding cut because it had signed onto the 'Munroe agreement,' which allowed the organization to pay union rates to its child-care workers.

Unless some kind of alternative financing is found, BACI will be forced to close all four of its child care centres on March 31, and leave 120 families scrambling to find day care.

Wishloff and other affected parents say the BACI employees deserve higher wage rates because the quality of service in the centres is far superior to anything they found at other non-licensed or family-run child care centres.

"We scoured the Lower Mainland looking for day care, and let me tell you it was a very unhappy experience," said Wishloff, who works in Richmond while her husband works in downtown Vancouver.

The Fair Haven centre is unique in that the children's centre is located on the lower floor of a modern, nine-year-old senior's extended care home.

While the children have their own separate programs, space and play area, they also have the option of shared activity time with seniors.

So far, parents have sent about 30 of the diaper-laden letters to minister Stephens, and plans are in the works to continue sending the unusual greetings to more and more government members, until the parents see some sign that their concerns are being heard.

One of the more frustrated parents is Vancouver resident Philip Yu, who was among the first people to speak out against the cuts.

After sending a batch of his own e-mails to almost all the Liberal MLAs, Yu received a prompt reply from a Vancouver area backbencher who invited the parent to a private meeting to discuss the situation.

Yu claims that when the MLA discovered the family did not live in his constituency, he said he could not help anymore, and simply offered to pass on their concerns to the Burnaby MLA closest to the child-care centre.

Yu also claims that the MLA and his constituency assistant both suggested that a Filipino nanny was better than day care anyhow, and that his children were "too young to learn" from the Early Childhood Education graduates who work at the BACI child-care centre.

"He has no understanding of the issues," said an angry Yu, who believes the MLA should have passed his concerns onto the cabinet minister responsible for child-care instead of another backbench MLA.

(The Burnaby NOW was unable to contact the Liberal MLA in question, prior to our weekend deadlines.)

Now, Yu is feeling frustrated and angry about the encounter. "Sure, it was kind of nice to get a quick reply, and I was feeling good that things were on the move. But I feel I'm either getting the run-around or he doesn't know what he's supposed to be doing, or maybe I'm just being avoided completely.

"I'm not impressed. In fact my own MLA has not responded at all. I could understand it if they just had a difference of opinion, but the silence is what I get instead," he said.

-Reprinted from the Burnaby Now.

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