

Child care to get \$1.5B boost; Budget expected to earmark funds for Liberal agenda -- Ontario resistance to national plan an obstacle for Ottawa [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Money for a long-awaited national day-care plan and more help for low-income families with children are likely to emerge in next month's federal budget, government sources say.

Finance Minister John Manley could earmark as much as \$1.5 billion in extra funding over five years to fulfill the Liberals' promises to help kids and poor families, sources said yesterday.

Officials in the human resources department are hoping Manley will come up with \$1 billion in additional funding for the National Child Benefit program and another \$500 million to help finance a joint federal-provincial day-care program.

The Liberals promised a Canadian child-care plan in their victorious 1993 election campaign but have yet to fulfill the pledge a decade later.

But Prime Minister Jean Chretien, who retires in about 12 months, is now committed to moving ahead on the so-called children's agenda, the Prime Minister's aides say.

In the Speech from the Throne in September, the government highlighted day care and other aid for young people as one of Chretien's goals for his final period in power.

The government "will again significantly increase the National Child Benefit for poor families, and will work with its partners to increase access to early learning opportunities and to quality child care," the speech said.

While Chretien is determined to push ahead in this area, the big unknown is how much money the Liberals can find to expand Ottawa's aid for children and poor families.

Manley needs to commit at least \$500 million over five years for day care to give momentum to federal-provincial talks that are aimed at creating a joint national program, officials say.

"That would be enough to convince the provinces to co-operate," said a senior government source.

Human Resources Minister Jane Stewart and her provincial counterparts met late last year. They began then to forge a national child-care plan, and are expected to continue their efforts after the budget.

Stewart must overcome reluctance on the part of some provincial governments, notably Ontario, to a national child-care plan, and settle on criteria for how new federal money would be spent by the provinces.

In 2000, Ottawa and the provinces worked out a deal that saw the federal government provide \$2.2 billion over five years for early childhood development programs.

But some provincial governments spent the money on services that had little or no connection to child care, federal officials say.

Now, however, "we're at a point where we think we can get some co-operation from the provinces," a senior government source said.

Last October, Laurel Rothman, national co-ordinator of Campaign 2000 - a coalition of 85 organizations monitoring Parliament's 1989 resolution to eliminate child poverty - estimated 16,000 children in Ontario alone are waiting for child-care subsidies.

Their parents either cannot afford care, share shift work to spell each other off for caregiving, or rely on unregulated, possibly unsafe care for their children, Rothman said.

The budget is also expected to include a significant hike in the National Child Benefit, which provides monthly financial help to low-income families with children.

The government had promised in 2000 to expand the benefit to \$2,500 for a family with one child by 2004, but Stewart hinted recently that the government has decided to do so earlier, possibly in next month's budget.

In addition, low-income families are expected to hear a pledge in the budget of even further hikes in assistance in the next few years.

But this move is likely to be met with some skepticism from critics who say that, under the federal-provincial agreement on child tax benefits that was worked out in 1998, poor families are not getting the help they have been promised.

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