

Subsidized day-care spaces at 7-year low; Provincial funding freeze blamed for growing waiting list [ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

A seven-year freeze in provincial funding has forced Toronto to cut about 1,600 desperately needed child-care subsidies, slicing the number of subsidies available to low-income working families to about 22,600.

That's the lowest number in about seven years, city child-care officials say.

As part of its 2002 budget, city council approved funding for 24,216 subsidized child-care spaces. Some of these spaces are operated by the city in its own facilities, but most are purchased by the city on a per diem basis from non-profit day cares.

However, the province, which is supposed to share the costs of subsidized day care with the city on an 80-20 basis, froze its contribution soon after the Progressive Conservative government was elected in 1995 and hasn't increased it since.

For the first five years, the city managed to find extra cash to maintain the full complement of day-care spaces. But with annual inflation and cost of living increases, combined with heavy pressure on the city's budget, officials have not been able to scrape together any extra money for the past two years.

As a result, officials have stopped filling some of the day-care spaces at the city's disposal, said Petr Varmuza, director of service, planning and support for children's services.

The number of unfilled spaces has crept steadily upward to 1,616 in recent months, Varmuza said, with no new cash in sight to pay for the spots. The cash squeeze means the city is currently funding only about 22,600 subsidies, he said.

Meanwhile, about 15,000 children are waiting for subsidized care, and those near the bottom of the list will wait longer than ever.

"City council has been very good about its part, but we can't keep going year after year without an increase," Varmuza said. "The only choice we could make was to stop filling all the spaces available to us."

The non-profit day cares that provide many of the city's spaces accept a per diem substantially less than would be paid for the same spot by an unsubsidized family, he explained, adding that the city must increase the per diem by a small amount each year to ensure that the facility remains viable.

To make matters worse, the province gets a lot of money each year from the federal government's Early Childhood Development Initiative, but has refused to direct any of that cash into day care, which could ease the strain caused by its funding freeze, Varmuza said.

Councillor Olivia Chow noted that the city's community services department released a report last week that painted a rosy picture of the success of the Ontario Works program in Toronto, which requires social assistance recipients to be in school or job training to get welfare.

But the report also pointed out that the program has failed single women with children because there isn't enough subsidized day care to allow them to take the training they need to find and keep a job, said Chow (Ward 20, Trinity-Spadina).

"You have fewer kids getting into day care, and fewer parents who can go out and work and earn the money they need to create a better home for their children," she said.

"The irony is that the taxpayer saves a phenomenal amount of money by providing this day care so parents can go out and work. It hurts the taxpayer and it hurts kids."

Jane Mercer, executive co-ordinator of the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care, said the spaces are desperately needed but won't be available to poor families until the province addresses the problem.

"When you consistently underfund a system for seven years, this is what you get," Mercer said. "They have been chipping away at the edges of our child-care funding and have never increased it to keep pace with inflation."

reprinted from The Toronto Star.

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