

Child care program pays off [CA-NB] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Dropping her three daughters off at day care is much easier for Lynne LaPointe.

One of nearly 100 employees at the Canada Post customer contact centre on the north side, LaPointe remembers the daily struggle she used to have when she left her crying children with a babysitter.

"My priority is my children, but I have to work. My employer depends on me to be there and to focus and I have to work, that is what I am being paid for," she said.

These days her child-care situation is much different. Leaving her children - Briar, 7, Mattie, 4, and Arden, 2 - at The Preschool Centre, she can go to work with a clear head and focus all day, confident that her children are well cared for and happy.

LaPointe is part of a group of mothers and fathers - call centre representatives and mail carriers - who are benefiting from the efforts of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) and the Union of Postal Communication Employers (UPCE).

These unions have worked together to establish a new, innovative child care program in Fredericton.

After the unions conducted a child-care needs assessment a year ago and identified a requirement for flexible and extended hours child care, they approached the Preschool Centre to become involved with the project.

The centre is a non-profit co-operative known for providing high quality child care. These groups worked together and developed a range of services to meet the diverse needs of the unions' members.

On Monday, all of the hard work over the past year culminated into the grand opening of a new child care centre on Clark Street. The space was offered by St. Anthony's Church and was extensively renovated and equipped to the tune of almost \$250,000.

Licensed for 60 children, including those with special needs, from birth to age 12, The Preschool Centre offers extended hours from 6:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m.

These unions are on the cutting edge in Canada for acknowledging the need for affordable, quality child care for employees, said Deborah Bourque, national president of the CUPW.

"We are starting to put it on the bargaining table to ensure employers are also taking some of that responsibility," she said. "Unions across Canada are starting to do this but we already have 12 projects across the country, always working with the child care community to build on what is already happening."

Bourque said many of these projects are not just for themselves or their members but also to push on the government and remind them they also have a role to play in providing quality, affordable child care to working parents.

"The government should be doing some of this work. So we are hoping it puts some pressure on the New Brunswick government to put more funding into the salaries of child care providers and early childhood educators," she said. "We are hoping they put more public funding into child care and look at home child care in a way that is more supportive."

LaPointe said it means a lot to her to know that she is valued by her employer as a person and as a parent.

"To have this type of environment with good meals, good programs and a structured environment means a lot because I can go to work and am able to make a bit of money, but more importantly my kids are taken care of," she said.

"To know my union got involved to make this happen in conjunction with my employer means a lot to me.

"I pick them up after work and it's wonderful because they are so happy to be there. They tell me an earful of stories about what they did all day. This really has made a big difference for me and my kids."

Cathy Steeves, a mail carrier on the south side of Fredericton, is a single mother of two young boys, Nicholas, 4, and three-year-old Zander. The new child care centre is perfect, she said. It is affordable and more importantly, her kids love to go there every day.

"Every morning they used to cry when I took them to a sitter, but it is so structured here, like school, that they are able to have their own experiences, playing with other kids their age and learning so much that I can already see them developing their own personalities."

Steeves said when the unions started assessing the need for this type of childcare last year she didn't think she would see the day when her boys would benefit.

"It is hard to believe it would happen so quickly," she said. "I thought my kids would be grown by the time it was in place. It has worked out perfect. The people here say they are the perfect children. I personally think they mixed them up with other children, but it is great they are so loved here."

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