

Day care to cost parents more as subsidies curbed: The NDP's program is being scrapped and others trimmed [CA-BC] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Thousands of parents will be paying more for day care next year as the result of cuts announced last week by the Liberal government. The before-and-after-school program set up by the NDP as a step towards a universal day care program is being scrapped. The government is spending \$15 million this year on that program, subsidizing more than 18,000 children.

In addition, \$26 million is being cut out of the \$126 million program that provides subsidies for lower-income parents who need day care for their children.

About 36,000 to 38,000 families now take advantage of the program, which provides subsidies on a sliding scale based on the age of the child and the income of the parents.

Pam Best of the Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre in Vancouver said the cuts will mean many parents will no longer be able to afford quality day care.

"The subsidy was never enough before. I don't know how anybody is going to be able to afford licensed care," she said Thursday.

Parents who can't afford licensed care, which costs about \$550 a month for a school age child in Vancouver, are forced to seek care in unlicensed facilities, some of which are illegal, Best said.

The Westcoast centre was one of 47 child care resource centres in the province that were notified Thursday their funding will be cut off as of March 31, 2004.

The centres provide referral services for parents and training for day care providers.

Lynn Stephens, Minister of State for Women's Equality, said the changes are necessary to make the system more affordable for taxpayers, even though they will result in needy parents paying more.

Stephens said the government consulted widely on child care in the fall and is moving to a new system to replace the one that is being dismantled, even though the details have yet to be worked out.

"The actual policy development is well under way and we know where we want to go and we have some really good ideas on how we're going to get there," she said.

Stephens could not say how much the government will spend on child care under whatever new system is developed, but it expects to save \$41 million of the \$200 million it spends now -- on support programs for parents and on support for day-care spaces -- on just the changes announced so far.

A spokesman for the human resources ministry, which gives out the day-care subsidies, said income thresholds for the program are being lowered, so fewer people will qualify and those who do will generally get less.

Details of the new subsidy schedule are being withheld until the provincial budget is released Feb. 19.

The before-and-after school program cut the fees in 800 licensed centres around the province from \$12 to \$7 a day.

When the program was introduced, the government estimated it would save the average family \$1,100 a year for each child in the program.

Sharon Gregson, a founding member of Parents for Childcare, called the changes a huge blow for parents. "It's especially difficult when people are being told to get off welfare and into low-paying jobs, and yet those low-paying jobs may be too much to qualify for help with child care," she said.

Changes to the welfare system announced last week mean single parents will have to look for work when their children reach three years

of age.

Region: British Columbia ^[2]

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