

\$64M for child care? Committee to recommend boosting budget [CA-MB] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The Manitoba government should almost double its child care budget to bring per-capita spending to the same level as Quebec, a review committee is expected to recommend this week.

The 25-member Child Day Care Regulatory Review Committee, which represents a broad cross-section of Manitobans, was appointed by Family Services Minister Tim Sale to help him develop a five-year plan.

Pat Wege, executive director of the Manitoba Child Care Association, said the committee will recommend a "made-in-Manitoba" system similar, but not identical to, Quebec's.

Details are confidential until Sale decides whether to release the report, which will form the basis for cabinet discussions in advance of next year's provincial budget.

Quebec offers \$5-a-day child care for all children up to age 12, with the service free to people on social assistance. A recent study concluded the program had reduced the number of single mothers on welfare by 37 per cent.

To match Quebec's per capita spending, the Doer government would have to channel another \$64 million a year into a program it has already boosted by \$14 million over two years.

Manitoba parents currently pay about \$19 a day per child for care, with government subsidies keeping costs as low as \$2.40 a day for some low-income parents.

Yesterday, Sale announced \$1.2 million funding for 365 new licensed child care spaces and the extension of a pilot project to train low-income people as child care workers. The money is part of the province's commitment of an additional \$4.7 million for child care in this year's budget.

Since the Doer government was elected, 1,959 new licensed spaces have been created, bringing the total to 23,691.

Wege said she is more optimistic than ever because NDP cabinet ministers with young families understand the issue -- Justice Minister Gord Mackintosh's kids used to attend a day care she ran and Premier Gary Doer's kids have used licensed child care.

"In order for them to do what they need to do in their lives, they depend on child care," Wege said, also citing the support of female NDP caucus members.

"Out of all provinces in Canada right now, I think Manitoba is best positioned to move forward significantly on child care and I think it's long overdue."

Sale said yesterday that universal child care is not realistic without major funding from the federal government.

"If provinces -- particularly poorer provinces -- choose to try and go it alone, they're going to put their tax systems in competition with provinces that don't value child care," Sale said, noting that Alberta's child care system is in poor shape.

The federal Liberals promised a national child care program in 1993, but have shown no signs of following through, he said.

Wege said the committee recognizes the fiscal realities and has made realistic recommendations. "We're not going off the deep end."

She said the committee is only asking for what Manitobans demanded when 24,000 people responded to the government's vision paper earlier this year. A summary of the responses is available on the Internet at: [www.gov.mb.ca/fs/programs/cfs/\[2\] visionfindings.html](http://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/programs/cfs/[2] visionfindings.html)

Wege expects the Doer government's commitment to child care will depend on the degree of pressure applied over the next few months.

Quebec funded its child care initiative by redirecting money from an ineffective program designed to persuade women to have more babies.

The Manitoba Child Care Association is also working on a labour market strategy to address the current shortage of qualified child care workers.

Julia Reyes, a single mother who set up a home day care after completing the new provincial training program, said financial compensation is poor, but it beats welfare. "It works for me," she said. "Being out of the system, you can manage your money the way you want."

Jennifer Trumbula, assistant director of Horizons Children's Centre, which opened a second centre at the Grace Hospital last month, said it was a challenge finding six new staff, but following new government salary guidelines helped.

Sale said the review committee will also recommend how to manage an expanded system. He said small rural day cares may want to work together around central "hubs" that allow them to share administration costs and expertise.

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<http://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/programs/cfs/> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7857> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/subsidy> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/budget> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding>