

City launches child care push: Commission to prod province for shift in spending [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Toronto is launching a new commission to encourage senior governments to spend money on child care.

"The 17,000 children and families who are waiting for child care (subsidies) in Toronto don't care who funds it, they just want the care," said children's advocate Olivia Chow. "It's up to the commission to break the log jam."

The independent commission, to be announced today, will be led by two high-profile community members: former New Brunswick Lieutenant-Governor Margaret McCain and Royal Bank executive vice-president Charles Coffey.

The commission will be charged with developing, by January, 2002, a blueprint to help Toronto and other cities negotiate policy and funding changes with Ottawa and Queen's Park, Chow said.

Once adopted by the city, it could be used to test a new way of doing business under the Social Union Framework Agreement signed by Ottawa and the provinces last fall, she added.

The commission is a response to the Ontario government's decision this year to spend none of the \$114 million in federal child development funds on licensed child care.

Next year, Ontario's share of the five-year \$2.5 billion federal fund will be \$152 million. Chow said she wants to ensure that some of that money goes to child care, the top priority in the city's Action Plan for Children, released last February.

"I'm not blaming the province for not doing what perhaps they should have done," said Coffey, a member of Ontario's Promise, launched by Premier Mike Harris last year to encourage businesses to subsidize child welfare programs. "The needs in this city have been clearly identified," he said. "Why have we not responded when the money has been made available at the federal level? We as commissioners have to ask those questions."

Coffey said child care is an economic issue that business needs to understand.

"We don't have time for a great deal of debate on an issue that's staring us in the face and needs to be addressed."

With 70 per cent of mothers with young children in the workforce, McCain said, child care is a necessity that can no longer be ignored.

"High-quality child care is the basis upon which everything else (for young children) is built," said McCain, co-author of 1999 Early Years Study commissioned by Harris.

"It affects learning, health and behaviour for the rest of their lives," she said. "But for some reason there seems to be a mental paralysis around (funding for) child care."

Child care was the foundation of the Early Years report, which McCain co-authored with medical researcher Fraser Mustard. She remains puzzled as to why the province hasn't spent any new money on it.

Beth Clarkson, a spokesperson for Human Resources Minister Jane Stewart, said Ottawa welcomes the move. She said Stewart feels the commission's insight "will be useful in making the province aware of how the public wants Ontario to allocate their dollars."

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