

Daycare shortage acute, parents desperate [CA-QC] ^[1]

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Emilia Ortiz figures she works between a rock and a hard place.

Ortiz, owner of a St. Leonard daycare centre, says she gets 10 to 12 calls daily from parents looking for daycare. But she doesn't even take names because her centre - which can handle 56 children - already has a waiting list of more than 300.

"I've encountered all sorts of desperation (from parents)," Ortiz said in an interview yesterday following a press conference organized by Liberal MNA Russell Copeman to criticize the daycare crunch.

"One woman had finally got a job in her profession after a year and a half of searching," Ortiz said. "For some reason she wasn't aware of the (daycare scarcity) and couldn't find a spot and was crying because she'd have to give up her job. She was so depressed."

The government admits there is a shortage of about 63,000 daycare spaces in Quebec.

Copeman, the Liberal critic for family matters, laid the blame for the situation squarely on the shoulders of the Parti Quebecois government. But Patrik Gilbert, an aide to Family Minister Linda Goupil who is responsible for daycare, said the problem exists because the former Liberal government spent a fraction of what the PQ is spending on daycare.

In 1994, when the Liberals were in power, they were creating about 3,000 new spots a year, Gilbert said.

The PQ is currently creating about 15,000 new places a year, he said. It has pledged to have 200,000 daycare places by 2005-06.

"If the Liberals had invested in the daycare network during their two long mandates, we wouldn't have this current problem," Gilbert said.

Copeman said one of the key factors in the current mess is the \$5-a-day daycare program, which has boosted the demand for space and swamped the government's ability to administer its daycare program or create new spots.

"The government has got to accelerate the creation of new spaces," said Copeman, citing a May 9 letter from a government official that says the province had been unable to provide almost 21,000 spaces that it previously authorized.

In its bid to have more non-profit daycare centres, the government has put a moratorium on for-profit operations, Copeman said.

The moratorium should be lifted right away, he said. Failing that, Quebec should permit the opening of daycare centres that would be allowed to charge what the market will bear. "It's not an ideal solution but desperate times call for desperate measures," Copeman said.

Gilbert said the moratorium on new private daycare centres is to be lifted next year.

"We started from zero, or almost, and we are building a fantastic (network) but it's not done overnight," he said.

Alternatives such as small in-home operations are "fully saturated" and many parents have to pay top dollar to have someone come to their homes, Ortiz said. "Usually, it's not a matter of not being able to find an alternative. There is just no alternative."

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