

Day cares need more money: MLA Says government-funded raises won't stop workers from leaving [CA-NB]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Trained child-care workers are taking service-industry jobs because they can make more money, says Liberal MLA Shawn Graham, and a government-funded raise of 60 cents an hour won't do anything to change that.

But Family and Community Services Minister Percy Mockler says day-care operators in the province tell him the raise is a step in the right direction. Furthermore, he says, there will be more raises in the subsequent four years of the federal government's children's initiative.

The provincial government announced \$7.3 million for an early-childhood development agenda Tuesday. Of that amount, \$3 million was directed to day care and \$1.8 million of that will go to salaries for day-care workers.

The raise works out to 60 cents an hour for workers currently making between \$6.50 an hour to \$7.20 an hour.

The \$7.3 million is entirely federal government money from its five-year, \$2.2-billion national children's initiative, said Graham, who questioned Mockler about the program during debate in the legislature Wednesday on his department's budget. The provincial government didn't come up with a single cent in additional funding to give day-care workers a bigger raise, even though it tucked \$100 million away in a "fiscal stabilization fund" -- which Graham calls a Tory re-election fund.

Mockler was at the table when government decided not to add any provincial money to the federal funds, Graham said.

"Government failed to come to the table with their own money and, as a result, this is far short of what's needed to make people entering into the day-care profession sustainable," he said. "Day-care operators across the province are saying they can't get people to enter at the salary offered.

"Resources are stretched to the limit and a 60-cent increase won't stop the flow of jobs we are witnessing."

Mockler said that prior to the federal government's contribution, the provincial government was already spending \$26.5 million a year on programs for children. It decided to take the \$7.3 million from the federal government and create new programs, he said. As far as the salary increase goes, he said, day-care owners have told him it's a step in the right direction and there will be more salary increases in the future.

Mockler said a Liberal government in 1994 cut grants to the province's day-care program. The current Progressive Conservative government has put together a program to help day-care providers and children, he said.

This is the first year of a five-year approach, Mockler said, and the new programs' budgets will go up in the coming years. His government put a condition on the new funding to day care that 60 per cent of it had to go to salaries, he said, and that will continue.

"We will put that condition on as long as I am minister of Family and Community Services," Mockler said.

A raise of 60 cents an hour in each of the next five years works out to a \$3-an-hour raise in the final year, which Graham acknowledged is not bad. But 60 cents in the first year does nothing to address the staffing shortage that exists right now, he said.

"There are 275 to 300 positions that aren't filled because people aren't entering the profession," he said. "If someone with certification in early-childhood development is working in the service industry because they can make more money, it begs the question: 'Are we meeting the needs of children?'"

Mockler rejected outright that there are 275 vacant day-care positions in the province. Every day-care centre is licensed by the government and has to comply with regulations on the number of employees working.

"This is fearmongering at its best by the Liberal Opposition," said Mockler. "It's unsubstantiated and if he has those figures, I ask him to bring it to the attention of my professional staff ... These are the same people that in 1994 cut all grants to the day cares of New Brunswick.

And this is the same Opposition that acknowledged in March 1999 that they had slashed and cut social programs to balance their budget.

"We must provide the best care for the most vulnerable in New Brunswick and I will never let my government slash social programs to balance the budget."

-Reprinted from The Fredericton Daily Gleaner

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