

Night daycare to make debut [CA-QC]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Responding to requests from parents who work hours beyond the Monday-to-Friday, 9 a.m.-to-5 p.m. grid, the Quebec government has launched 10 pilot projects offering evening, weekend and even overnight daycare.

The service will be available at the same \$5-a-day rate charged for Quebec's government-financed daycare system. "Four per cent of parents wanted this type of daycare," Family Minister Nicole Leger said yesterday.

One pilot project at the Montreal Casino operates 24 hours daily, 365 days a year. "Yes I think it is a good idea," Leger said when asked about the Casino daycare centre, explaining that the Casino is a workplace.

Daycare will not be offered to Casino patrons. "If we don't have any demand for night childcare, we won't do it," she added, stressing that the 10 projects are experimental and intended to meet the demands of parents.

The others will either be open all weekend, or will be open for extended hours until midnight or 1 a.m.

Ronney Duguay, who has run a daycare in Rimouski for five years, thinks the pilot projects are a great idea that will benefit needy parents who work night shifts.

His daycare will be open all weekend and until midnight during the week, and may eventually extend its hours to 24-hour service.

Duguay's daycare is beside the Rimouski hospital, and over the years he said he has received hundreds of pleas from doctors and nurses to stay open later to suit their schedules.

Jeff Begley, vice-president of the Federation of Health and Social Services at the Confederation of National Trade Unions, represents 3,000 daycare workers across the province. He says the pilot project is long overdue.

"I think it's an excellent idea. It's been a long time that the demand has been there. It's good for the economy, good for parents who need those services and good for jobs. It's a winning situation for everybody. If people can't go to work because they have children they have to care for, that's a problem for the economy."

But a daycare owner with six years' experience says she would never offer 24-hours-a day service because it would be detrimental to children, and would also raise sticky issues about their bathing and dressing needs.

Caroline Seres, who runs Les Amours de Caroline daycare in ile Bizard, said she can appreciate that some Quebec parents work odd hours, and may need somewhere to leave their children at night.

But she said children are much better off going to sleep in their own beds than being put to bed by an unknown daycare professional. "A daycare is great if it's meant for teaching. But if you start having kids sleep over, it starts to become sort of cold.

"Daycare is now educational; it's not a babysitting service. I don't think children will be taught at night. And I have no idea how they'd wash themselves, or get ready for bed. Someone would have to wash these kids with a cloth, and touch their bodies. That's a huge lawsuit waiting to happen."

But Duguay said he doesn't foresee a problem in undressing and preparing children for bed at his daycare.

"Our female workers will take care of that. We don't have baths, but they will wash the children with a cloth. I can't imagine there would be any problems with that," he said.

There are now 120,000 daycare places in the province and Family Minister Leger said she wants to add another 80,000 by 2005.

Russell Copeman, Liberal daycare critic, said that "four out of 10 children" who need daycare still can't find a place, and the government should lift its ban on for-profit daycare, offering parents the choice of unsubsidized daycare without further burdening Quebec taxpayers.

"They (the PQ government) seem to have an ideological objection to for-profit daycare," Copeman said.

But while he is critical of the government's ban on for-profit daycare, Copeman nonetheless applauded the initiative of offering 24-hour daycare. "I think it is a good idea," he conceded.

-Reprinted from The Montreal Gazette

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