

Providers fear big cuts to local daycare spaces [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS Windsor child-care providers warn that families in this area could be hard hit if Ontario loses thousands of subsidized daycare spaces if the province doesn't step in to provide funding in its coming budget. Andrea Calver, spokeswoman for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, said more than 15,000 spaces across Ontario could be at risk when \$63 million in federal funding runs out next year. The City of Windsor could be forced to eliminate, through attrition, about 430 spaces by April 2010, Debbie Cercone, executive director of Housing and Children's Services for Windsor, said Thursday. ... Cercone said Windsor is facing a \$7.7-million budget shortfall to cover subsidized spaces and is in the process of determining how it will manage if the province doesn't make up the difference lost in federal funding. "We have to have an answer on this because we have some pretty significant implications for our community in terms of delivering child care," said Debbie Cercone, executive director of Housing & Children's Services in Windsor. "You can't one day decide you're not going to have 232 spaces in a community and just kick people out of a space." Cercone said the city doesn't have a waiting list now for daycare spaces and could consider reducing the number of spots available by not filling a space when a child leaves. But, she added, the province has to make its position clear as soon as possible so providers can plan accordingly and would not be forced to make sudden cuts affecting families already in the system. Still, she said, that's not ideal considering the continuing downturn in the local economy and with so many parents between jobs or seeking retraining. "We need to develop a plan," said Cercone. "We need to extend the (federal funding) money as long as we can. If the province is not committed, we could lose 436 spaces through attrition." She said the total budget stands at \$34 million and the money is used to fund programs such as subsidizing families for spaces in private daycare, contributions toward wages to pay early childhood educators and offering support for children with special needs. She said the city may pay all or part of the cost, depending on the income of the family seeking the subsidy. Mark Donlon, executive director of Children First -- which works with Windsor families of special needs children -- said unless the federal funding is renewed somehow the number of families that could be served may drop "drastically." While this would not mean cutting families currently enrolled it could mean those wishing to sign on in the future would face "enormous waiting lists, leaving many children languishing at the time they need help the most." He added that research shows that children with developmental and emotional issues require early intervention to succeed in later years. "This is still a ways off," he said. "It depends on what the federal government does. If there is less funding it would mean access to the service would slow immensely and what would happen is that kids at the front door would be locked out." In 2006, the federal government cancelled an agreement set up by former prime minister Paul Martin to provide funding for child care to the provinces. Ontario used the last payment -- \$254 million -- and spread it out over four years. The remaining \$63.5 million will run out later next year. Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty wouldn't say whether his upcoming budget would cover the shortfall. He said he believes he still has time to convince Ottawa to change its mind. ... - reprinted from The Windsor Star

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