

Student parents facing 'day-care crisis' ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

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Tina and Zeke Zimonick found out first-hand how difficult it is to raise a family and attend university when day care is unavailable.

Tina is a kinesiology student and Zeke is a law student. They have been on the wait list since February 2009 for the University of Saskatchewan Students' Union (USSU) Childcare Centre.

Tina said the couple, knowing how difficult it was to find infant day care, went on the list as soon as she was pregnant.

They were hoping to have a spot at USSU Childcare Centre for the 2009-10 academic year but weren't successful.

There are 418 parents on the wait list at the USSU Childcare Centre and more than 200 for Campus Day Care -- the other child care centre on the U of S campus.

There are 110 day-care spaces between the two child care centres serving all students, faculty and government employees at the U of S.

USSU general manager Caroline Cottrell, who sits on the day care's board of directors, tried to put the severity of the situation into context.

"A small city in Saskatchewan is 5,000 people. At any given time there are over 30,000 people on campus, between students, faculty and government workers involved with the synchrotron and other government departments. That is the size of six small cities, but we only have 110 day-care spaces," she said.

Wait lists for infants and toddlers are especially long at the USSU Childcare Centre, with Campus Day Care not accepting those ages, and there is a city-wide shortage of infant and toddler spaces.

"Day-care crisis is almost the proper wording for it, especially for the infant age groups," said USSU Childcare Centre director Colleen Gerling.

The Zimonicks, as a result, were caught without day care. Unwilling to sacrifice either of their academic programs by taking a break, they returned to classes with a five-week-old baby in tow.

The couple tried to plan their schedules and alternate taking care of their daughter Zoe. Despite planning, there was still overlap and two days a week they had to bring their child to their classes.

"A lot of days we had to take her to class with us. If she got fussy I would just have to leave class," she said.

Zeke sat in the back of his law class, attempting to learn while

Zoe slept.

Both said not having stable day care affected their grades.

At the end of April, the couple was contacted by the USSU Childcare Centre for a position in May. They were given 48 hours to accept the position.

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The Zimonicks ultimately made the decision to turn down the child care.

"We just couldn't afford that \$775 a month for the three or four months we wouldn't be using it," said Tina.

They put their names back on the wait list but don't expect to get in for Tina's last year of school.

Gerling said wait-list numbers at the day care have remained constant for the last three years. The USSU board of directors has been writing letters to university administration since 2005 asking for support to expand the day care.

She said the day care is licensed to expand from its 66 spaces to 90 day-care spaces but lacks the physical space, under provincial regulations, to increase.

Lori O'Leary, director of Campus Day Care, said that day care is also interested in expanding. It only accepts children starting at pre-school age because of lack of room.

With Campus Day Care virtually the only on-campus day care available for faculty members -- USSU Childcare Centre prioritizes its day care for undergraduate students-- Leary feels it's important for the day care to bridge the gap between its 21/2 year-old acceptance age and the one-year paternity leave allocated to faculty.

"A lot of faculty and staff have one year of maternity leave so we are missing a link between that one year and the 21/2 years old required when they can come here," she said.

Ron Cruikshank, director of projects and engineering for the university, said the day cares on campus have been in contact with space planners but there simply isn't any additional space.

He said the university is short space for academic and teaching purposes without taking into account the day cares' request for expansion.

He said the only options at this stage are construction of a new space, a new building or adding to an existing building -- all options that require further funding from the government.

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-reprinted from the StarPhoenix

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