

Toronto searching for solutions ^[1]

Day Three in the Toronto Star's series "The Child Care Challenge", Part 1

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EXCERPTS

Bangladeshi immigrant Rahima Akhter is desperate to take English classes so she can train to become a medical assistant and supplement her husband's low wages.

But she can't enrol in the full-day classes unless she gets help to pay the \$1,342 monthly fee to put her daughter in the Crescent Town Day Care Centre located in the school where she attends half-day kindergarten.

Akhter has been on the city's child-care subsidy waiting list since Nov, 2009. Today, 5-year-old Jannatul is one of more than 17,700 Toronto children waiting for a subsidy, including 150 hoping to get a spot in the Crescent Town centre near Victoria Park and Danforth.

Meantime, the daycare, which has space for 10 toddlers and 24 preschoolers, sits half empty. That is because area parents like Akhter can't afford the fees.

"I am finding this very frustrating," says Akhter, who has a university degree from back home. "I need to get my English and get work. Living on one income is just not possible."

The daycare, which is run by East York East Toronto Family Resources, opened last October with money from the now-defunct national child care plan. It is one of 57 in Toronto threatened by a lack of subsidies and the introduction of all-day kindergarten. Five of those centres have closed.

"The way we fund this system just doesn't work," says Mindy Williams, the daycare supervisor at Crescent Town. "It's time we took a serious look."

That time may have come for Toronto, which oversees some 56,600 licensed child-care spaces in almost 1,000 centres and 1,000 private homes and administers 24,000 fee subsidies. It is the largest child-care system in the country -- outside Quebec with its \$7-a-day daycare.

This month, Toronto Mayor Rob Ford agreed to strike a child care task force to report on how to "expand access to affordable, quality child care."

It has been 15 years since the Metro Task Force on Services to Young Children and Families urged the provincial and municipal governments to have a plan in place by 2000 to ensure access to quality child care for all families who need it.

This latest probe was sparked by community development committee chair Giorgio Mammoliti, who cited a 2008 United Nations Children's Fund report that ranked Canada last, with Ireland, for child care services among 25 affluent countries.

A key finding of the report was that investing in high quality early childhood services "pays huge social and economic dividends and reduces other costs down the road," Mammoliti noted in a report to the committee last month.

"Child care remains a major challenge for many Toronto families," said the councillor for Ward 7 York West. "Exploring options for expanding access to affordable, quality child care is a priority for the new Toronto council.

"Without the appropriate levels of this critical service, the social development and economic success of Toronto is constrained," he said.

City council last week voted to refer the idea to Ford's office, which will take the lead. His office will work with city staff to develop terms of reference and appoint task force members from government, business, labour, education, academia and the child care and parent community.

The task force, which Mammoliti will chair, work will likely begin in April and report to council in July.

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It is a crucial time for parents as daycares struggle with the loss of the national child-care program, uncertainty around all-day kindergarten and long-standing provincial underfunding.

Queen's Park has not increased the per-day amount of money it pays for child-care subsidies since 1995. The city has been using reserve accounts to top up those subsidies to reflect the real cost of the program.

But those reserves will be gone by the end of next year, leaving a \$27 million hole in the system. Without new money, some 2,700 subsidies will have to be cut through attrition.

Meantime, one quarter of children currently in child care are moving into all-day kindergarten, leaving centres scrambling to retool to serve babies, toddlers and preschoolers.

Queen's Park has provided some funding to address the transition, but city officials predict a shortfall of at least \$47 million by 2015. Without that funding, more than 400 of the 643 Toronto child-care centres funded by the city will be in trouble; many may close.

"We really are at a crossroads," said Elaine Baxter-Trahair, the city's general manager of children's services.

High poverty rates and a large immigrant community mean child care is one of the great levellers for kids at risk in the city, she said. It is also a necessity for working parents.

But there are worries the tight-fisted Ford administration may use the task force to cut costs. Most vulnerable would be 56 city-run child-care centres and one home child-care agency that pay good wages and benefits in a chronically underpaid sector.

These centres cost almost \$70 million a year. But off-loading them to non-profit child-care agencies in the community would put their high-quality programs at risk, child-care advocates say.

"If the task force can raise the profile of the need for ongoing sustainable funding from the province and the federal government, then it will be a good thing," said Councillor Janet Davis (Ward 31, Beaches-East York).

"If it's to look at cheaper models that compromise quality, or close or devolve the (city's) directly operated centres, then there will be a great deal of opposition to that plan from council and from the community," she said.

"I'm pretty confident that what this task force will conclude is that what we really need is more provincial and federal funding. Period," she said.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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