

Parents hold on to hope day care spaces can be saved ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

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"Every morning, we wake up at 6 a.m. so we can walk to school - even in the winter," said Tristan on a late August morning at the school, which recently moved into its new home on the second floor of Swansea Town Hall. "She's so happy, so safe. As a mom, I feel so fulfilled."

This wasn't always the case. Tristan immigrated from Mexico five years ago, first settling in British Columbia before arriving in Toronto three years ago. When she came here with her three children, Andrew, 6, Ricky, 14, and Elwim, she had nothing - no job, no income.

For the single mother, currently going through a divorce, finding suitable, subsidized day care was crucial.

"For me to be able to give (my children) a good life, I need to work," said Tristan, who is training to become a law clerk.

The mother of three waited a year before she was granted a subsidy, then she had just 15 days to secure a day care spot. When she inquired at Swansea Nursery School, she learned there were just two remaining spaces. As far as she is concerned, Swansea is the best day care with "amazing teachers."

Swansea Nursery School has been a part of the neighbourhood for the past three decades. It's a non-profit, licensed child care centre that serves children two-and-a-half to six years of age. The nursery school, run by a parent volunteer board of directors, provides two snacks and a hot lunch. Its staff walks children to and from kindergarten. Subsidies are currently available from the city on a first-come, first-served basis, but there is a waiting list.

Toronto has 55 city-run child care centres, staffed by city employees. There is space for 7,000 children - the majority of whom receive subsidies.

There are 650 centres across Toronto that have contracts with the city to offer space to those people who receive a subsidy, but can't secure a spot in a city facility. There are 24,000 fee subsidies with 20,000 children currently on the waiting list. An independent consulting firm, KPMG, recommends the city cut 2,000 subsidies in an effort to reduce costs.

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"I've heard a rumour the city is cutting 750 of those in the upcoming year, but I haven't heard yet," said Parkdale-High Park Councillor Sarah Doucette.

Cutting subsidies would create "an awful domino effect," said the councillor.

"If parents can't afford day care, a lot of the time they have to stay home," said Doucette. "This affects income, mortgage and putting food on the table. If you can't afford day care, it affects everything."

Single parents would especially suffer, said Doucette.

"They might have to turn to food banks and social housing," she said. "Day care is vital to improving your standard of living."

York West Councillor Giorgio Mammoliti is chair of a city task force examining child care. He told Toronto Community News in an earlier interview that the province bears some responsibility for the current situation (having already cut 2,000 spaces and set to cut 700 more next year).

"We cannot run the risk of losing those subsidies for good in the City of Toronto," he said and added that if the province won't give the city more support, "then this city has a decision to make."

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Licensed day care cost ranges from about \$55 to \$90, according to the city. It certainly doesn't come cheap, agreed Leslie Venturino and Nicki Karadi, both Swansea Nursery School parents.

"We need a national day care strategy," said Venturino, president of the board of directors at Swansea Nursery School.

Venturino, whose youngest, Sophia, attends Swansea Nursery School - her eldest, Emma, is a graduate - cited the province of Quebec as an example. There, the cost of day care is just \$7 a day.

"It's almost unreasonable to ask parents to pay as much as \$3,000 a month, said Karadi, a teacher. Both her daughters, Louelle, 3, and Sophie, 5, attend Swansea Nursery School.

- reprinted from the Inside Toronto

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