

Child-care system divided, forum told; Publicly funded system would improve accessibility, fairness candidates hear ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

CORNER BROOK - Robert Wilton gets frustrated when he thinks of all the people in receipt of social services who can avail of subsidized child care, while he is not eligible for such a benefit simply because he goes to work every day.

The Corner Brook resident's comments at an early childhood education and child-care forum in Corner Brook Saturday epitomizes what many say is the divisiveness created by the current system and the need for a service that is accessible and affordable to all.

"If I applied and got turned down (for the government-funded programs that are available to low-income families), that would be fine and dandy, but I don't even have the chance to apply," said Wilton, adding that some people on welfare are probably better off than his family is financially because of their access to such social benefits.

The forum was one of the three being organized during the ongoing provincial election campaign by the Canadian Union of Public Employees. The first, the second of which was held in St. John's Sunday and the third scheduled for Marystown Tuesday, are meant to give candidates an opportunity to discuss with voters what an early childhood education and care strategy could and should look like in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Currently, nearly all child-care providers operate as for-profit businesses. The biggest problems working families face are securing spots in a reputable daycare setting for their children and being able to afford the service.

On hand to facilitate the discussion were child-care researcher Martha Friendly of Ontario, and parenting columnist Dara Squires of Corner Brook. Five local candidates were present, including Tory incumbents Tom Marshall and Vaughn Granter, Liberal candidate Donna Luther and New Democratic Party hopefuls Tony Adey and Jordan Stringer.

The issue has already hit directly at home with some of the candidates.

Luther, who is running in Humber West, said her daughter could not enroll in a post-secondary course of study because she could not find someone to care for her child. Meanwhile, she said Western Health - Luther's employer until her retirement earlier this month - is currently considering having its employees start earlier shifts in the morning.

She expects this will create problems for those who will not have anyone to look after their kids for that extra bit of time each morning because the daycare businesses likely will not open any earlier. She believes a publicly funded system could be more adaptable to such change.

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Adey, who is vying to be the MHA for Bay of Islands, said he and his partner have taken stock and, as they try to pay off their student loans and purchase a new home, the money needed to care for a child is just not there. He agreed with Friendly and Squires, who said there needs to be a community-based approach to universal child learning and care that is funded and managed at the provincial level.

"I think we can spend our money more effectively in Newfoundland and Labrador, and I think child care should be a top priority right now, so folks like myself and like Donna's daughter can have children," he said.

Marshall, whose latest cabinet portfolio was finance, said early childhood education and child care are a priority for his party, which has announced a 10-year strategy to improve the system.

"There is no disagreement here on the need for child care," said the Humber East incumbent. "It's the model: should it be a universal system or should it be a system where you give money to certain people to open up spaces in their home?"

Granter, who was a teacher for 23 years before getting elected in a byelection in Humber East, hearkened back to advice he got from one of his education professors when it comes to the decisions future governments have to make on this issue.

"He said, no matter what decision you make for a student, you make the best decision for the child," said Granter. "Early childhood education is the same."

The discussion, which engaged several of the nearly three dozen people in attendance, revolved around the idea that government-funded,

universal child-care programs would be an economic stimulator by freeing up more parents to re-enter the workforce and improving the pay scale of those who work in the day care and early childhood fields.

Paulette Tobin, a well-known education advocate locally, said the fact this issue tends to pit groups of people against one another is a sign that government cannot wait any longer to address the problems.

"Until you equalize and provide child care that is adequate to the working class and to the people who are unable to obtain employment, you've really got big problems and you are going to see it carrying through when the children get older," she said.

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Region: Newfoundland ^[2]

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