

Child care spaces urged ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Licensed child care spaces are still in short supply in Saskatchewan but the government has to add more spots in a way that's sustainable, Education Minister Donna Harpauer says.

Harpauer's comments came as the NDP used question period Monday to accuse the Saskatchewan Party government of failing to address a "looming child care crisis" in the province as families face long wait lists for daycare.

"If the government wants to talk about Saskatchewan being the best place to live, work, and raise a family then it has the responsibility to ensure families receive the services and support they need," said NDP MLA Danielle Chartier.

"How are those who have children supposed to engage in our workforce or train to be in the workforce if they don't have high quality care that they can rely on, afford and feel good about?"

While Harpauer said she agrees with the Opposition that more child care spaces are needed, she laid much of the blame on previous NDP governments.

Harpauer said the Saskatchewan Party inherited a child care "void" after forming government in late 2007. The province had just 8,800 spots at that time, compared to about 26,000 in Manitoba, she said.

"We need to do more. We need to have more spaces available, and we need to support the community based organizations that run our daycares, and we need to do it in a sustainable manner in the fiscal capacity of our province so that we will have these child care spaces going forward," Harpauer said in the assembly.

"But we're not going to go back where Saskatchewan only has 8,000 spaces for the entire province."

She said the Sask. Party has already increased child care spaces by 35 per cent in its first term in government, and has promised to add a minimum of 2,000 more in the next four years.

Saskatchewan still trails many other provinces in terms of providing spaces, but the province is trying to catch up, Harpauer later told reporters. But the infrastructure to support the spaces needs to be in place and workers must be trained, she said.

"It isn't just a matter of allocating the funds and saying the spaces will magically happen."

There are currently about 12,740 spaces operating or in development in Saskatchewan, a figure that includes both licensed childcare centres and licensed day home providers, according to the government.

The NDP - along with a group of day care directors who came to the legislature to watch the debate - said lack of spaces is only part of the problem, with child care workers being drawn away to higher paying careers.

Joy Bergstrom, director of Millie's Early Learning Centre in Saskatoon, said the issue of wages is the main obstacle when it comes to recruitment and retention.

"What's being neglected is the fact that you can add as many spaces as you want, we soon won't have workers to work those spaces," said Bergstrom in an interview.

Training for two years as a child care worker to earn, in some cases, a salary comparable to what you could earn at a retail or fast food outlet is unappealing for many people, she said.

The government has increased funding to community-based organizations that manage daycares but "that didn't translate to more than 10 to 20 cents an hour for the average worker in our field," Bergstrom said.

But Harpauer said not only was there an increase of nearly 18 per cent to community-based organizations that manage daycares over the government's first term, but also increases to training grants for early childhood educators.

-reprinted from the Leader Post

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