

Local candidates discuss childcare platforms ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

It's not a hot-button issue like MLA severance pay, the "no-meet committee," land use, or provincial deficits - but childcare is a topic that hits close to home for Medicine Hat families.

The News asked local candidates what they would do to improve childcare accessibility and affordability.

Progressive Conservatives

The PCs have already done much towards improving access and affordability of childcare, said incumbent Cypress-Medicine Hat MLA Len Mitzel, including increasing the threshold for families who qualify for the maximum childcare subsidy from \$35,000 to \$50,000.

The PCs will continue to work to increase existing childcare spots, and ensure proper accreditation for those who do open up new childcare spots, he pledged, adding that their budget also includes plans to phase in full-day kindergarten across the province, a focus that will give "children the head start they need."

"The easy answer that anyone can tell you is 'We'll just give more funding,'" said Medicine Hat PC Candidate, Darren Hirsch, explaining that alongside advocating at the provincial level he would look at what needed to be done locally for Medicine Hat.

This could include working with the City on issues such as zoning and finding adequate locations and spacing for those wanting to set up childcare businesses, he explained.

With burn-out being an issue for childcare workers, improvements to the system could also come through improving work conditions of childcare providers, such as adding in flexibility or part-time hours, he said.

Wildrose Party

"We want to review the entire spectrum of childcare options, daycare, home care, preschool, after-school and kinship care and we want to identify ways to increase access," said Drew Barnes, Cypress-Medicine Hat's Wildrose candidate.

"We also want to make government childcare grants more flexible," he said, adding that local decision making is important to the party - so if childcare spaces are what's needed, government grants could possibly go towards creating more spaces.

Wildrose will also look to reducing unnecessary regulatory barriers, such as reviewing current standards so those with extensive practical childcare experience can gain accreditation easier, he said.

"We have to get back to this balanced budget," said Blake Pederson, Medicine Hat Wildrose candidate. "And trying to get money back into the hands of the people."

Doing this will help families offset costs - such as childcare, he said, especially for those in lower incomes.

For a family's pocket book, Barnes pointed to the \$2,000 tax deduction for each of their children under the age of 18, and plans by the party to "strongly lobby" the federal government to allow for income splitting in families where one parent stays at home.

Alberta Liberals

Not enough money is being invested in non-profit daycare, said Medicine Hat Liberal candidate, Matt Sandford.

"When it comes down to taking care of your kids, it shouldn't be about someone making money to keep your kids safe throughout the day. That should certainly not be the caregivers main concern. It should be about the children first and profit second."

The Liberals would invest \$100 million in expansion for government subsidized early childhood education, he said.

As well, the Liberals would reduce the current work requirement to receive maternity leave from 52 weeks to 26, Sandford said, to help alleviate childcare worries.

Introducing a fair tax system - including eliminating the flat tax rates - is how the Liberals are proposing to fund these investments, said Cypress-Medicine Hat Liberal Candidate, Jonathan Mastel.

"It's really to benefit society as a whole," said Mastel. "If we invest in our young now, we'll be saving later on."

NDP

Alberta should take an example from Quebec, said Medicine Hat candidate Dennis Perrier, and have a provincially sponsored universal daycare program.

"It should be government sponsored, it should be quality, it should be regulated, and people working there should be qualified and paid as a qualified person," said Perrier.

This system would allow those who couldn't otherwise afford childcare enter the workforce and become taxpayers, he noted.

"We don't need a hodgepodge of private people setting up daycare, unqualified, probably unregulated, un-inspected - we don't need that," he said, adding that money is "no excuse" considering Alberta has the second highest GDP in any jurisdiction in the world, second only to Luxembourg.

NDP candidate Manuel Martinez could not be reached for comment.

Evergreen Party

Generally, the Evergreen Party believes in universal childcare programs, said Medicine Hat candidate Graham Murray.

"We still have a lot of concerns with the financial reasons, we don't want to put the burden of the system on the taxpayers," he said.

"In a sense we need a system that's going to be fair for everyone," he said, such as facilitating both childhood programs but also providing tax incentives for families who do have one parent staying home to care for their children to reduce the financial burden.

-reprinted from Medicine Hat News

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