

Lack of cheap daycare major cause of child poverty, says advocacy groups ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Jenny Zhen moved to Vancouver from China three years ago, three months pregnant and hopeful the relocation would mean a better life for her unborn baby boy than she and her husband had.

"I felt like in China, too much pressure," said the slight, soft-spoken mother. "I said I would like my son to have a better environment, so that's why I came here."

The struggles were immediate: Ms. Zhen's husband didn't receive his visa for nearly two more years, leaving the immigrant to care for herself and her newborn. She depended on scant savings and assistance from friends she met at church. After her husband arrived, the couple had difficulty finding meaningful work. He got a job in security and, not being able to afford daycare, she took a temporary night-shift job stuffing flyers - one of few available options - for \$9.50 an hour.

The lack of affordable daycare in British Columbia is a significant problem for many - not just immigrants - and a major contributor to the province's childhood poverty rates, according to child and youth advocacy coalition First Call. The coalition, which is made up of more than 90 provincial and regional partners, released a report Wednesday fingering B.C. as having the second-highest rate of child poverty in Canada, just behind Manitoba. The rate in 2010 was 14.3 per cent, amounting to about 119,000 poor children - "about the same as the total populations of New Westminster, Esquimalt, Cranbrook and Williams Lake combined."

While there are a myriad of contributing factors, the cost of child care is a major issue for families and often has ripple effects: If a parent can't secure it, it's unlikely he or she can sustain sufficient and meaningful employment. Average child-care costs in B.C. range from \$9,000 to \$14,000; a person working 37.5 hours per week at minimum wage earns about \$20,000 a year.

One recommendation in First Call's report is to implement universal child care, charging \$10 a day for full-time care, \$7 a day for part-time care and nothing for families that make less than \$40,000. It is a system similar to one in Quebec, which costs \$7 a day.

"We know from Quebec's experience that the plan starts to pay for itself after 12 years," said Sharon Gregson of the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C. "Affordable child care supports families to go to work and go to school. What we need is the political will to deal with child poverty in this province by implementing the \$10-a-day child care plan."

Children and Family Development Minister Stephanie Cadieux said the BC Liberals "certainly recognize the challenges B.C. families face in finding and accessing quality, affordable child care" and have "examined First Call's proposal in some detail."

"Unfortunately, the reality is that implementing universal child care in B.C. is not feasible from a financial perspective at this time," she said. "The cost of implementing universal child care has been estimated at up to \$2-billion a year."

New Democrat children and families critic Claire Trevena says her party has discussed the plan as well, but acknowledged it simply can't be done without federal assistance.

"It is an extremely expensive proposition ... and there are logistical challenges, because you need to ensure there are spaces, which means you have to ensure there are child-care workers, which means you have to ensure there is the ability to recruit and retain child-care workers," she said. "It isn't just as simple as legislating it; there are a lot of different levels to it."

New Democrat social development critic Carole James agreed the plan is not currently feasible, but said other improvements must be to child-care availability in B.C. She blasted the Liberal government for not having a comprehensive plan to address poverty, and child poverty in particular.

"Instead of piecemeal approaches," she said, "we need to look at actually putting together a child-care plan."

-reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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