

Alta. child-care plan needed ^[1]

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Source: Lethbridge Herald

Format: Article

Publication Date: 19 Dec 2012

EXCERPTS:

Shannan Little and her husband have two young children.

The couple doesn't require full-time child care for their three-and-a-half-year-old or their one-and-a-half-year-old, as Little's husband is a musician and takes care of the children most days.

But when he goes off on tour for a week or two at a time, they then have a need beyond Little altering her work schedule or the reliance of family members to help take care of the kids.

They have yet to find a proper solution and believe it is time for the Alberta government to mandate a new public child-care system.

"We only found one of our (Lethbridge's) accredited daycares that actually had space for occasional child care," Little explained.

"Because of the planning and their budgeting they just don't have those types of spaces. So if you're not willing to put your children in full-time care, and pay the full-time price, it's very difficult to find qualified providers. It's very frustrating and it's very expensive if you're not in full time."

The Littles aren't alone in their situation.

Public Interest Alberta (PIA) launched an advocacy campaign last month calling for the provincial government to better invest in early child care and education, as well as to address the need for affordable spaces.

According to data from 2010, compiled by PIA members, the Alberta government allocates \$341 per space per child, well below the national average of \$752 a year.

"The point of this campaign is to collect those personal stories from people on how they are coping with living in a province where we don't have a system," said Sherry Hunt, chair of Children's House Child Care Society, one of Lethbridge's non-profit child-care centres.

Hunt is also a member of PIA's child-care task force, helping to initiate the campaign, and a union activist in her own workplace.

"If you need drop-in care, it's almost impossible to find. If you have any sort of special needs, good luck. If you have more than one child, good luck. We need something similar to what happens in education, where there are standards and funding that isn't coming directly from the parents. It's about setting priorities," she said.

Waiting lists aren't a primary concern in Lethbridge, Hunt says. The issue is more about income levels in the current market-based system, which is why she wants to see the creation of an actual provincial child-care system run and regulated by the government.

"Funding is so lean for those spaces that the workers get paid very, very little for the amount of school, the amount of education and the amount of effort it takes to do that job," Hunt said.

"Any raise that we want to give them has to come out of the parents' pockets because there is no government funding to help us."

"I don't see it changing for as long as my children might need this, so this is just something that we will have to deal with until they're in school," Little added.

"I think if child care was not based on profit, if it was public, there would be room for families with different needs. I think this government has not yet made early childhood learning and care a priority in Alberta."

-reprinted from the Lethbridge Herald

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