

Promised wage hike for Ontario child care workers still far off^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It will be several months before child care workers at provincially licensed centres and home daycares see a dime of promised retroactive pay hikes, the Liberal government has confirmed.

Despite the fanfare announcement by Kathleen Wynne in Kingston, Ont., on Monday it is expected to be late summer before these child care sector workers - some of them making as little as \$13 an hour - see the \$1-an-hour bump effective Jan. 1 because layers of bureaucracy must be penetrated first.

Child care workers have been waiting since last April, when the budget was introduced, for the wage hike but the June provincial election helped derail the process.

The budget set aside \$269 million in funding for a \$1-an-hour hike this year and the same next year. It will apply only to workers making less than \$26.27 an hour. In order to get the money the child care centre operators must apply to their respective municipalities and, in turn, pass it along to their employees.

Education Minister Liz Sandals' office confirmed Tuesday it could be well into the fall before child care workers see the promised money because the applications process alone is going to take time.

"Based on current information, we expect that allocation of funds to operators can take place as early as spring 2015 through to the fall with individuals seeing a pay increase soon after," said Sandals' spokeswoman, Nilani Logeswaran.

Logeswaran said the \$269 million will support a three-year period as committed in the budget, and "is expected to be an ongoing investment that will be provided through the ministry's child care allocation to municipalities."

Carrie Lynn Poole-Cotnam, chair of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Ontario's social service sector, said the key is "that the money ends up in the pockets (of the workers)" and not end up funding other operating costs.

New Democrat MPP Peter Tabuns (Toronto-Danforth) said it seems "kind of mean spirited" to keep these workers waiting for their increase. "If it is important these people get this increase, and it is, then they (the province) should be trying to expedite it," he said.

CUPE, which represents more than 5,000 child care workers, is concerned these new provincial dollars will disappear after three years, leaving the municipalities and the child care centres to bear the cost of the increases into the future.

The province's 2012 move to block funding for child care was supposed to give municipalities more flexibility to determine priorities and set conditions, said Toronto Councillor Janet Davis.

"But we will have none of that authority under this new grant. It will be straight across the board for everyone," she said.

Any money that goes into the pockets of chronically underpaid daycare workers is an improvement, Davis acknowledged.

"But setting up a new parallel system to hand out \$1 an hour is not efficient," she said. "If we are going to administer it, they should allow us to design it in a way to that is integrated with the way we already flow funds to child care centres."

The administrative nightmare for municipalities is just another example of Ontario's "piecemeal approach to funding," said Carolyn Ferns of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

"Every new initiative raises so many questions," she said. "What's the application process? How will this fit in with funding that already exists? Will municipalities have discretion on how the funds are used?"

Both the coalition and the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario say Queen's Park should introduce a provincial pay grid for child care workers and move to base funding for programs, instead of adding more layers to a system that relies on cash-strapped parents' ability to pay.

"A standardized wage rate in the child care sector will ensure staff with equivalent education and work responsibilities are paid a similar rate of pay no matter where they work," said Shani Halfon of the association.

Advocates have been calling on the province to set a long-term vision for child care and develop a policy framework with goals, timetables and stable funding.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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