

Centres want hike equal to child benefit ^[1]

Child care crunch

Author: Rabson, Mia

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EXCERPTS

Manitoba is considering a hike to daycare fees specifically to match the increased money parents will start getting from Ottawa this month.

The federal government increased the Universal Child Care Benefit for all children under six by \$60 a month, starting Jan. 1. It will rise to \$160 a month in total. It is also introducing a new \$60-a-month UCCB for kids between six and 17 years old. The additional money won't begin flowing until July, when parents will receive a cheque for \$420 per child, on top of the existing UCCB payment.

But daycare centres in Manitoba want the province to consider hiking the limit on licensed daycare fees to match the UCCB increase.

"It's something we thought was a great idea, because it's not like the families will have to dig into their pockets to pay for it," Allyson Cruise-Scarpino, executive director of Horizon's Children's Centre Inc., told the Free Press.

Cruise-Scarpino wrote to Family Services Minister Kerri Irvin-Ross this month asking if she would consider an increase, which the centres want so they can raise wages and help offset the difficulty in recruiting and retaining child-care staff.

She said the child-care workforce still earns about 20 to 25 per cent less than competing industries. "This trend continues to be an issue for recruitment and retention of staff in our industry," Cruise-Scarpino wrote in her letter. "We, as leaders in the field, see a significant opportunity for a change to this current situation that plagues our field."

Margaret Ferniuk, the director of Early Learning and Child Care with Manitoba Family Services, wrote back Jan. 21 that raising fees \$60 a month is under consideration. "Your suggestion to increase child-care fees by the same amount as the increase to the Universal Child Care Benefit is one of many options that will be considered in addressing recruitment and retention issues facing the (Early Learning and Child Care) workforce in Manitoba," Ferniuk wrote.

Manitoba already raised operating grants for daycare centres by two per cent this month so they could boost wages.

In 2012 and 2013, the province implemented a \$1-per-day increase to child-care fees, bringing the fee for a licensed infant space to a maximum of \$30 a day and for a preschool space to \$20.80 a day.

Manitoba is one of only three provinces that caps fees for licensed child care.

A spokeswoman for Manitoba regional minister Shelly Glover was critical of the province for considering raising child-care fees by the amount of the UCCB increase.

"Our Conservative government introduced and then expanded the Universal Child Care Benefit to help hardworking families make ends meet, not to pad the bottom line of the NDP government," she said in a written statement.

Jinny Sims, the employment and social development critic for the federal NDP, said the UCCB isn't a child-care program in the first place. "It doesn't create spaces, it doesn't even cover a fraction of the cost of day care," she said.

The NDP will campaign on a promise to create a universal national childcare program, with up to one million spaces costing no more than \$15 a day. That is what an affordable child-care program looks like, said Sims.

In addition to the UCCB, the federal Conservatives are adding \$1,000 to the amount of child-care fees parents can claim as a tax credit. About four million families in Canada will receive some payment under the UCCB, including about 1.7 million families with children under the age of six.

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[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/budget> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/staff>