

# A downtown daycare's plight leaves parents worried <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** McGinn, Dave

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## EXCERPTS

Rosa Villacorta and her 18-month-old daughter get off the subway every morning and the two head to Ms. Villacorta's Yonge Street office building. Just before 8 a.m., she will take her daughter across the street to her daycare centre. Ms. Villacorta, a corporate assistant for Blackwood Partners Inc., is one of many people in Toronto who relies on a municipal subsidy to send her child to daycare. But there are plans to close the not-for-profit centre her daughter attends, and replace it with a for-profit centre - which means Ms. Villacorta must scramble to find another option. "If I don't have daycare," she says, "I don't have a job."

The Scotia Plaza Child Care Centre is one of the rare not-for-profit daycares downtown. It owes its prime location to a deal the building's developer struck with the city more than 25 years ago: In exchange for added density, it would make room for a rent-free childcare space. The 25-year agreement ended last summer, but the current landlord granted a one-year extension. Come June, the landlord plans to rent the space out to Kids and Company, a for-profit daycare provider that cannot accommodate families who rely on subsidies.

That will be one more blow to a system of affordable childcare in Toronto that advocates say is in desperate need of fixing.

"It is absolutely at a crisis," says Jane Mercer, executive co-ordinator of the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care. "We really cannot afford to lose one physical, not-for-profit space. In fact, we need to grow them."

Ms. Mercer says the city's daycare system needs to be completely overhauled. "We really need a revolution," she says.

Parents face a dearth of available daycare spots coupled with huge fees. Parents in Toronto pay more than anywhere else in the country to put an infant into daycare, shelling out \$1,676 a month, according to a study released last year by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Ian Cooper knows how fortunate he is to have his two children in this daycare in the heart of downtown. Its imminent closure has parents whose kids attend the centre dealing with a wide range of emotions - "disappointment, frustration, maybe some anger," says Cooper, a media lawyer. "There's a sense that something is being lost, and quite frankly it's not being replaced by [something] better."

Mr. Cooper and other parents from the centre are making a last-ditch effort to save it. To do so, they will have to raise \$2.5-million over 10 years to cover rent for the space, although even doing so may not be enough. The decision will still rest with the building's owner, who may choose a new tenant.

The Scotia Plaza Child Care Centre is highly valued by parents. It is operated by George Brown College, which places a premium on standards of care and education. As a lab school, the day care also sees a steady stream of college students helping out as they apply what they are learning in the classroom. And not only is it downtown, it is also on a transit line - a hop, skip and short stroller push up from King subway station.

Daycares like this are difficult to find in the downtown core, where rents are high.

Now that the owners of Scotia Plaza are in a position to begin collecting rent on the space come summer, they expect to do so. "Right now, the plan is to transition from a George Brown daycare to a Kids and Company daycare provider," says Ana Radic, chief operating officer of Dream Office REIT, which co-owns and operates Scotia Plaza.

Ms. Radic says there is "flexibility" on her company's part. "We're always open to discussion with George Brown."

But as things stand now, the college is "gearing up to be moved by the middle of the year," says Mark Nesbitt, vice president of corporate services at George Brown.

Seventy children attend the Scotia Plaza daycare. Of those, 23 are subsidized by the city of Toronto. None of those families with subsidies could find the same arrangement with Kids and Company; it is a for-profit provider with no contract with the city to accept subsidies.

George Brown is working with the city to find daycare spaces for those families who rely on child care subsidies, Mr. Nesbitt says.

They include Sarah Stotesbury, a single mother who is pursuing a master's degree at the University of Toronto, was able to secure a spot

for her son at another George Brown lab school with the college's help. Without a subsidized spot, she would probably have to drop out of school. "I wouldn't be able to carry on in this program," she says.

There are currently about 25,000 subsidies in Toronto's childcare system, says Elaine Baxter-Trahair, general manager of Children's Services. Approximately 16,500 people are on the subsidy waiting list.

Yet there are likely even more people who need the subsidy but don't see the point in joining a line that long, Ms. Baxter-Trahair says. Families living below the income cutoff - those who spend 20 per cent or more of their before-tax income on food, shelter and clothing - are drastically underserved by the current system; the existing subsidies only address the needs of 30 per cent of children in that population, she says. "The system needs to grow."

This may help drive families away from Toronto.

"You see companies want to move back in to the centre," Councillor Shelley Carroll says. "We've seen a growth in commercial [space] being leased out. But the supports that make it possible [for families] to be based there are disappearing, and child care is the most important one."

Ms. Mercer would like to see Mayor John Tory address child care as a core need, just like housing or transit.

"We hear from our new mayor that he wants this to be a great city for people to live in. Whether you're on the low-income [scale] or the high-income, we need families to have access to affordable child care," Ms. Mercer says.

Ms. Villacorta would like to see the city add more subsidized daycare downtown. "That's where everybody works," she says. "Not everybody can afford private daycare or a nanny at home."

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** subsidy <sup>[4]</sup>

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