

# This is the childcare election, advocates say - including for lagging Hamilton <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Jodi Dean has more at stake than the average person this federal election. For her, it's not about lower taxes or which leader is more charismatic. It's about the ability to graduate.

Dean is a single mom of three kids. One of them, eight-year-old Madison, has special needs.

Dean is living with her parents as she finishes her social work diploma at Mohawk College. The goal: to get a place of her own, to be gainfully employed in her field and to find childcare for Madison. But right now in Hamilton, there just isn't any, so she can't finish her mandatory 600-hour work placement to graduate.

Dean was one of the speakers at a childcare election forum on Tuesday held by YWCA Hamilton, the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction and the Social Planning and Research Council.

Parties talk about childcare every election. But in this one, the forum experts said, it's higher profile than it's been in years.

That's music to Dean's ears. Whatever government gets in, she wants more affordable childcare spaces, particularly for kids with special needs, and she wants a subsidy to help parents like her. She's one course away from finishing her diploma, but she can't complete the placement without childcare for Madison. It has to be flexible, and so does her job, because Madison's special needs - epilepsy and severe osteoporosis - mean Dean may have to leave for health emergencies.

"Accessible subsidized spaces is a huge issue for me," she said. Local candidates for the Green, Liberal and New Democratic parties also attended Tuesday's forum, giving their parties' stances on childcare.

The Conservatives were invited, first through a local incumbent's office and then through the national headquarters, said Tom Cooper, director of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction. But no Conservative representative attended.

That left the challengers - Hamilton Mountain Green candidate Raheem Aman, Hamilton Centre Liberal candidate Anne Tennier and Hamilton West-Ancaster-Dundas NDP candidate Alex Johnstone - to trumpet their parties' own claims that they'd best the Harper government's childcare efforts.

They all have good pieces in their platforms, said Jean Clinton, a McMaster University child psychologist who spoke at the forum. That includes the Liberals' monthly childcare subsidy of \$533, the Green pledge for a national children's commissioner, and the NDP's promise of one million new spaces over a number of years.

But Clinton said none of them promise what Canada really needs, which is a comprehensive national child strategy.

The ideal election platform would be one that promises a "full system of child well being," including extended parental leave, universal childcare, more support for parents and better wages for early childhood educators, among other efforts, she said.

"The brain is developing whether the environment's good or not. The brain is developing in mediocre or worse environments," she said. "We need to realize that as politicians are walking the walk, babies' brains are developing."

And "none of (the parties) are talking about this comprehensively."

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Regardless of party stripe, childcare advocates agreed on one thing on Tuesday: Hamilton needs help.

According to 2013 data, the city has only 168 licensed childcare spaces for every 1,000 children, says local advocate Judith Bishop, who hosted the event.

That's fewer than comparator areas such as Niagara and London, and only about 16 per cent of what's required. And it's worse in low-

income areas. Ancaster fares the best at 32 per cent. The worst area for childcare spaces is the lower city north of Barton Street, which has zero.

'We're going to vote for childcare'

Bishop gave an impassioned speech to city councillors in March, and they agreed to lobby the provincial and federal governments for a national childcare strategy. She also told them for every \$1 invested in childcare, society gets a \$7 return.

Bishop pleaded with the roughly 50 attendees on Tuesday to consider this.

"Every one of you is going to vote," she said, "and we're going to vote for childcare."

In the meantime, Dean just wants to get into the workforce. She's doing meaningful work as a speaker in the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction's Speak Now series, but that's not cutting it.

"For so long, it's felt like something unachievable," she said of graduating. "This is something that I've wanted for a very long time."

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

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

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