

Give us quality, affordable childcare spaces, say parents ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Vicki Nelson's due date was still six months away when she signed up on a childcare wait-list in Regina.

When she finally sneaked her baby into a spot at the YMCA two months after her maternity leave ended, the cost — \$900 per month — was the same as her mortgage payment.

With another baby now on the way, Nelson and her husband are contemplating whether they can afford child care for their two children simultaneously. They tossed around alternatives. None are ideal.

In Saskatchewan, Nelson's situation is more the norm than the exception.

The province has far from the highest childcare fees in the country, but it grapples with the lowest share of regulated spaces: 11.5 per cent of children aged zero to five.

Risa Payant, a single mother of a three-year-old and six-year-old, said, "The hardest part of trying to raise my children thus far has been securing quality child care that I feel good about and is affordable."

Like many expectant mothers, Payant dialed every institutional daycare she could find on the Saskatchewan government website and put her name on their waiting lists. By the time Payant needed to return to work, she was No. 600 or more.

With their second child, her ex-husband had to quit his job to stay home with her until a spot opened up.

The cost of daycare worked out to almost half of the parents' income combined.

"Child care really has been a nightmare for our family," Payant said, calling it "consistent and constant work" and a "never-ending source of stress."

Speaking to parents and childcare workers in Saskatchewan, the consensus was clear: They want more quality spaces at more affordable prices.

The Saskatchewan government announced 540 spaces in 2013 and the same number last year, bringing the total to 14,200. But the most recent provincial budget had nil.

That's why when a new YMCA branch opens in Regina later this week, it won't include new childcare spaces.

Melissa Perras, director of the two of the branch's childcare centres, said the YMCA's wait-lists can be as long as three to four years.

"We have a lot of ladies that put themselves on our childcare wait-list before they've even told friends or family or sometimes even their partner that they're expecting," she said.

The centres are also in need of more funding for staff and space or resource improvement, she said.

Perras, along with most people the Leader-Post spoke with, are in favour of some form of national childcare program.

The idea was explored by the Liberal Party in the mid-2000s, then nixed when the Conservatives took power in 2006. They instead introduced the Universal Child Care Benefit, which provided parents with \$100 per month for each child under six.

The party recently increased and expanded that benefit. The idea of cheques, though, figures less prominently in parents' minds than childcare opportunities.

"This increase in the universal payment was probably pretty silly, because for people who need the money it doesn't even really make a dent in the actual childcare costs or the actual child raising costs," said Nelson, who would rather see more income-based assistance.

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