

Low wages a major hurdle for daycare workers ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Educating the city's smallest citizens is Alana Powell's passion. But it's her part-time job tending bars that pays the bills.

The 30-year-old early childhood educator has a degree, a diploma, and long list of accolades for her work. Yet the salary from her east-end daycare is too low to meet life goals like paying for her wedding or building up her qualifications.

"Looking to the future, it's just not possible to do those things with only one job," she says.

Advocates say good wages and working conditions are the unspoken piece to the child-care puzzle: the key to a successful system, but seemingly its lowest priority. While workers are increasingly being asked to rack up qualifications to get a job, their wages are slipping and vary wildly from one child-care centre to the next.

Now, campaigners are asking the provincial government to implement regional wage scales to help standardize wages, benefits, and working conditions for child-care workers, as provinces such as Manitoba, P.E.I., Nova Scotia and British Columbia have already done.

"The lack of standards and consistency across settings, it really impacts our overall professional morale," says Shani Halfon of the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario.

Research from the organization shows that from 1998 to 2012, overall wages in the field dropped by 2.7 per cent. And while workers in new full-day kindergarten settings might make up to \$30 an hour, those in private child care might scrape by on just above minimum wage — an indication that "staff continue to subsidize the child-care system with their low wages," according to a recent report.

"It's one way of certainly levelling quality and providing some consistency across programs no matter where these kids live or go to child care," says Halfon.

This task is particularly urgent in the GTA, where the income disparity between child-care workers in public, non-profit, and private settings is even greater — and where child-care costs are the highest in the province.

"I think the things that make it harder to be an ECE in Toronto are the things that make it harder to have precarious jobs in Toronto — the highest cost of living," says Carolyn Ferns of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

It's also an essential part of narrowing the gender wage gap, Ferns argues, something that the Ontario government has publicly pledged to tackle.

"Child care is the poster child for the gender wage gap in many ways," she says. "Not just because child care is a female job ghetto, but because building child care empowers women in the workforce. It's a huge support for working mothers."

But while the federal election campaign has focused attention on families' need for affordable child care, little has been said about how a universal system would help workers who would benefit from more stable and better paid public sector jobs. The vast majority of licensed child-care services in Ontario are currently provided by the non-profit sector.

"(Workers) are the key component in creating quality programs, and you're not going to be able to do it on the cheap," says Ferns.

"I think that's the missing piece in all the child care platforms," she adds.

That rings true for Powell, who often works 53-hour weeks without a single day off to stay afloat.

"We need stability of life and the future in order to perform to the best of our ability," she says.

"If you're worried about your finances and what the future looks like, that makes it more challenging to be at your best every day."

Child care by the numbers

\$23.18: median wage for unionized municipal child-care workers in Ontario.

\$16.00: median wage for non-unionized municipal child-care workers in Ontario.

59: Percentage of Ontario child-care centre staff with medical benefits.

77: Percentage of Ontario child-care centre staff with paid sick or personal leave days.

47: percentage increase in number of temporary child-care workers in Toronto from 2009 to 2014.

7: percentage increase in permanent child-care workers in Toronto from 2009 to 2014.

16: percentage of unionized child-care workers in Toronto.

34: percentage of women's income spent on child care in Toronto.

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