

Childcare crisis in East Kootenay getting worse, says task force ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The shortage of early childhood education workers in the East Kootenay area is at such a critical level that daycares are closing and some parents, who want to return to work, just can't.

"It's been ongoing for decades and it just keeps getting worse and worse," says Mary Noble, Chair of the East Kootenay Child Care Task Force.

There's currently about 18 to 20 vacant spaces for early childhood education workers in the region, she says, and those spots have been vacant for over a year.

"The problem is very big right now," said Noble. "We have a severe lack of spaces for children and toddlers. We just don't have enough early childhood educators to run centres and the wages for early childhood educators aren't enough to keep them in the field right now."

A report commissioned by the task force released earlier this year found the shortage of daycare workers in the East Kootenay is the worst in the Interior.

"We cover such a large geographical area that it's hard to get people to come and stay and live here because there's not a lot in some communities to keep people here," said Noble.

In the Cranbrook-Kimberley-Creston area, most early childhood education workers make less than \$16 an hour, she says, while in the Columbia Valley it's a little bit more.

She says this shows their services are undervalued as workers aren't even able to make a living wage, which would be closer to \$18 or \$19 an hour.

Furthermore, Noble says there used to be subsidies and grants to help run the daycare centres, but those have stopped in recent years and owners of childcare facilities are having trouble paying their workers, or they're having to overcharge parents.

Noble says she'd like to see more help from the provincial and federal governments and recommends instituting a rural communities living allowance, similar to the northern living allowance, for early childhood educators to come to the region and actually stay there.

The ultimate solution, however, would be a national childcare program.

"It's been proven many times these national childcare plans contribute greatly to the economy because parents can go back to work," said Noble.

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