

Toronto 'desperately' needs more affordable daycare spaces, councillor says ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Toronto will never become a fairer and more prosperous city unless it acts now to increase access to affordable child care, says Councillor Janet Davis.

With Toronto adding 1,400 new licensed child care spaces to existing programs and new centres over the next two years, Davis says the city must also add more subsidies to ensure low-income families can find a spot they can afford.

She figures at least 350 more subsidies are needed in 2016 for the system to remain accessible to the city's poor.

The city's budget review committee is seeking an additional \$28.8 million for new programs and expanded services in the proposed \$10 billion budget for 2016, including 24-hour warming centres for the homeless and secure door systems for public housing. But there is no new money for daycare subsidies.

"We know that fee subsidies and other funding is desperately needed to pay the highest child care fees in the country," said Davis. A recent study put the median monthly cost of a licensed spot for an infant in Toronto at about \$1,736.

"Thousands of parents need child care to go to work or school and find a way out of poverty," said Davis (Ward 31 Beaches—East York.) "A poverty reduction strategy without added child care subsidies is not a strategy that will help parents get on their feet and on their way to financial independence."

Davis will be making her plea at the city's final budget review committee meeting Tuesday. The budget goes to the city's executive committee Feb. 9 and is expected to be approved by council Feb. 17 and 18.

Toronto daycare worker Sammantha Hosam's 7-month-old daughter Mila is one of more than 11,500 children on Toronto's daycare subsidy waiting list.

Before she went on maternity leave, Hosam, 28, was working six hours a day and studying for her diploma in early childhood education. She is due to return to work in May. But without a daycare subsidy, both her income and her career aspirations will go down the drain.

"There is no way I can pay for daycare without a subsidy," says the single mother who is living with family for support. "If I don't get one, I'll have to quit my job and probably my studies too."

The \$3.5 million cost of adding 350 new subsidies this year amounts to a property tax increase of just over 0.1 per cent, said Davis. That is a small price to pay for a city with the lowest property tax rate in the Greater Toronto Area, she noted.

If councillors don't want to raise taxes, Davis said council should use more money from the city's daycare reserve.

"We build parks, homeless shelters and libraries and recognize the operating costs of these new facilities," she said. "But we haven't done that with child care even though our public policy is to serve families from all incomes. How can we do that if we don't add any subsidies?"

Beyond this year's subsidy crunch, the city needs to look at the question of affordability for middle-income parents who aren't eligible for subsidies, she said.

"The city and the province need to figure out a way to make this essential service affordable for all families in an expensive city like Toronto," she said. "Our economic future depends on it."

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