

Desperate parents pray for federal action amid daycare 'anarchy'

Author: Monsebraaten, Laurie

Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 22 Mar 2016

AVAILABILITY

Read online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

New parents Glenn Gustafson and Sara Ehrhardt were bracing for the high cost of child care after their son Clarence was born last May.

What they weren't prepared for was the lack of daycare.

After putting their names on waitlists before they even told their family they were expecting, the Toronto couple say they feel "lucky" to have found a toddler spot a 20-minute drive from their home — in the opposite direction from work.

And they will pay two months in fees to hold the space because their son will be too young to use it when it becomes available in September.

"I don't feel that the system is broken. I feel that there is no system — that it is total anarchy," Gustafson says.

The couple is looking to Justin Trudeau's first budget — and his promise to build a national child-care system — to provide some relief.

However, advocates are worried child care will be buried in the new government's \$20-billion social infrastructure fund aimed at also addressing affordable housing, seniors facilities, women's shelters and recreational/cultural amenities over the next 10 years.

As the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives noted in its recent Alternative Federal Budget report, past experience has shown that when child-care funding is included as part of broader federal transfers to provinces, not much happens.

Ottawa needs to earmark funds specifically for child care, like the previous federal Liberal government under Paul Martin did in 2005, said Toronto child-care expert Martha Friendly, who co-authored the report's chapter on child care. (Martin's first budget committed \$700 million to get the ball rolling on a five-year, \$5-billion national plan.)

The left-leaning advocacy group is calling for \$600 million this year to kick-start the Trudeau government's national strategy with funding to increase by \$1 billion annually in each of the following five years.

With a total of just \$6 billion in social infrastructure funding expected to be spent over the next four years, there won't be nearly enough to properly fund a long-term strategy that will take a decade to build, Friendly said.

"But it's enough money to get started," she said. "Provinces, municipalities and parents and early childhood educators are desperate for there to be some money in the budget to shore up some of the most glaring holes, such as Toronto's subsidy waitlist," she said. "So that is what we will be looking for — the long-term strategy and the short-term fixes."

Carolyn Ferns of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care said Trudeau's claims to be a "feminist" won't square with a budget that doesn't include specific funding for child care because women can't work and participate equally in society without it.

"It's time to walk the talk — and real action on child care is part of that," she said.

For Gustafson and Ehrhardt, who were living in Sweden when their son was born, Canada's historic lack of political will on child care is frustrating.

"I am very happy to be back in Canada and to build our family here," said Ehrhardt. "But after seeing the Swedish system I know that it is possible to do better for our children."

Ehrhardt, who was working for the Global Water Partnership in Stockholm when she became pregnant with Clarence, said that within three days of his birth, she received a letter with the location of the local daycare her son was eligible to attend at 12 months.

"Had we stayed in Sweden we would have been free to enjoy getting to know our child without the worry of what would happen when we choose to return to work," she said. "Clarence would have started at a local school for about \$200 Canadian a month within walking

Instead, they spent the past year-and-a-half — and \$400 in fees — putting their name on numerous daycare waitlists in Toronto, while still in Sweden.

"We are a privileged middle-class family here and still we have struggled," she says. "I can't imagine how a newcomer or single parent would navigate this."

"We keep getting tax breaks and rebates, but that doesn't create a single daycare space," he said. "It's not policy. If children are a priority, politicians need to demonstrate it in a real way."

- 69,000 Licensed child-care spaces in Toronto, out of 351,000 licensed spots in Ontario.
- 21% Toronto children who have access to licensed child care.
- 11,526 Toronto children waiting for one of the city's 25,116 child-care fee subsidies in December.
- 29% Low-income children in Toronto who have access to a child-care fee subsidy.
- 17.7% Ontario children who have access to licensed child care.
- 25% Children in Canada who have access to 1.2 million licensed child-care spots.
- 50 The number of years until Ontario has enough licensed child-care spaces for half of the province's children, at current rate of growth.
- \$16.50 Median hourly wage of a child-care worker in Canada.
- \$1,736 Average monthly fee for an infant in a licensed child-care centre in Toronto.
- \$28,300 Average annual child-care fees for a Toronto couple with a toddler and pre-schooler.

spaces [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/accessibility> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/spaces>