

Brian Gallant shelves 2nd major daycare election promise ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A major New Brunswick daycare expansion plan that was put before voters in the 2014 provincial election and scheduled to get underway this week has been indefinitely shelved by the Gallant government, the second major daycare promise it has backed away from in two years

Daycare expansion was the single largest social program proposal made by Liberals in the 2014 campaign with Brian Gallant committing to spend \$120 million over five years to add 6,000 new daycare spaces.

That campaign promise included a commitment to spend the first \$40 million during the current fiscal year, which began on Friday.

But Education and Early Childhood Development Minister Serge Rousselle said he can't proceed with the promise because a report from a child care task force he appointed last spring is four months overdue and because he wants to see what the federal Trudeau government's daycare plans are first.

"Before making any major changes we want to see all those recommendations," Rousselle told CBC News on Friday.

It's the second multi-million dollar daycare promise the Gallant government has backed away from since its election.

It also promised to significantly enhance daycare subsidies for lower income working families by adding \$62 million over four years in new funding to the program, including \$15.5 million more in both its first and second budgets.

Instead it added nothing in its first budget and boosted spending by just \$500,000 in its second budget.

That \$500,000 is so far all of the new money set aside for the two daycare promises, even though according to filings with Elections New Brunswick the total commitment was to spend \$182 million, including \$71 million in the government's first two years.

Campaign promise won support

Lacey Long, a Riverview mother, was initially excited by the Liberal daycare promises and let down when they didn't come through.

At the time of the election she and her husband could not afford daycare despite both holding down jobs and had to juggle work schedules so one parent would be home at all times.

"I would work the night shift, the overnight shifts anything I could find to not use daycare," said Long.

"We found ways, moved our shifts around and worked around daycare to not use it. We couldn't afford it."

Long felt the all the new daycare money promised by Gallant would help her family a lot and said so publicly.

"Loving the new Liberal platform," she wrote on the Liberal Party's Facebook page after the daycare plan came out.

"The little guy and your average [New Brunswicker] truly need this. It's not the rich leaving the province to find work."

One preschooler in full time daycare in New Brunswick costs between \$140 and \$180 per week but working parents with a combined income above \$40,000 are eligible for less than \$30 per week in provincial subsidies.

A combined income above \$50,000 drops that help to less than \$8 per week.

"Rent, food, car, immediately right there for a family of four \$50,000 is a very, very tight budget," says Long, explaining why her family couldn't afford daycare.

But nearly two years later the help has not materialized and Long said looking back she should have known that would likely happen.

"It's something that he [Gallant] promised that he seriously couldn't do," she said.

"It's a pledge that just shouldn't be made. It's one of those I hope people didn't bank on."

Daycare spaces required

Inadequate access to licensed and inspected daycare spaces is a problem that has been acknowledged by the last three provincial governments.

It is considered a drag on the economy that keeps many parents out of the workforce and is felt to contribute to a shrinking population by discouraging some families from having children and increasing the incentive for others to leave the province.

A report from Rousselle's department last year suggested the province needed 23 per cent more spaces for infants below the age of two and 33 per cent more spaces for pre-school children over the age of two to adequately serve young families.

To address the problem, daycare improvements with significant new funding was a centrepiece of what Gallant called the Liberal Party's "Family Plan" in the 2014 election.

The idea was meant not only to address the province's child care shortage but also became a major piece of the Liberal party's job creation plan.

Gallant said a study by Jupia consultants, headed by the province's now chief economist David Campbell, showed the new spaces would create 982 daycare jobs and would likely free hundreds of parents to enter the workforce and take full time employment.

Liberals suggested that would make the program almost self funding.

It helped Gallant dismiss criticism that Liberal daycare and other commitments were vote generating gimmicks too expensive to be kept.

"We're going to be very honest with New Brunswickers and we are going to keep our promises by making promises we can keep," said Gallant during the campaign.

Daycare operator frustrated

But it's not just parents like Long who are disappointed at how things turned out.

Nathalie Harrigan is one of southern New Brunswick's largest daycare operators with 215 licensed spaces for children in two Happy Clown facilities in Quispamsis

Not only did the two big promised improvements to daycare get sidetracked, she said she's now battling against proposed reductions in provincial school bus service that is leading her to cut at least 30 of her approved after school spaces.

Many children who attend regular school but who are too young to go home until their parents leave work take a bus from school to Harrigan's facility for afternoon care instead.

But the school district said to save money that service will stop in September for children who attend school in one district and go to after school daycare in another.

Harrigan said that change affects the parents of 60 children in her care and she can't understand why a government committed to expanding daycare is letting it happen

"I haven't seen any improvement from any of the promises that they've set," said Harrigan.

"And now we're going to be losing some of our buses which means we'll have to downsize. So to me I don't feel the politicians or the province is really on our side."

Report, federal action coming

The education minister part of the problem is a two-person task force he appointed last May to recommend ways "to establish favourable conditions for daycare services" has taken much longer to do its work than expected.

The task force was instructed to report back by early December but Rousselle said as of Friday morning he had still not received its findings although he was expecting to receive the report that afternoon.

Also, Rousselle said the new Trudeau government in Ottawa has indicated it wants to talk about establishing a national daycare plan and so now it makes little sense for the province to anything until that is sorted out.

But Rousselle disagrees provincial Liberals are wrong to abandon promises made to voters about daycare because of a change in government in Ottawa.

"Did you think we knew that at that time? It's easy to say that two years after," said Rousselle

Riverview's Long said the federal election had one silver lining.

For the first time this fall she thinks she will be able to afford day care for her children, after the Trudeau government kept its election promise to increase child benefits for families like hers.

"Thank goodness for the federal Liberals. We're getting the help that we need that should have come on the provincial level," she said.

-reprinted from CBC News

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