

B.C.'s child-care squeeze 'so much more stressful than it has ever been'^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Jamie Garrett, an east Vancouver mother of two school-age children, often feels like she works just to pay for child care.

Ironically, the 38-year-old single mom is employed in early childhood learning, spending her days taking care of other people's kids until she can pick up her own — an eight-year-old son and 11-year-old daughter — in after-school care at 5:30 p.m.

Like many working parents across B.C., she must figure out what to do with her kids before and after school, on at least seven professional development days a year, plus some half days, and of course spring, summer and winter breaks. There are also an extra nine days for the gradual entry program when her kids went to kindergarten.

Those extra days can add up to more than 70, a number far exceeding the typical two or three weeks of vacation time. That leaves paying for child care the only option for those without grandparent support.

But at more than \$800 a month for the school year, plus more in the summer months when the cost of care goes up, Garrett says there is no money left for her kids to take extra classes in art, music or sports. That's despite the fact that child care costs and expenses are shared with the children's father, who shares custody.

For families with one tot in infant care and the other in elementary school, fees can run around \$2,000 a month or more.

When her kids were in pre-school, Garrett was eligible for government subsidies of around \$500, but she was still using up most of her paycheck to cover the fees. So she had to make sacrifices.

She traded living in her own home to move in with mom and dad. And because her parents still work, she has had to cut back her hours so she has time to go pick up her children. Owning a car is also out of the question.

Working parents, already struggling with unaffordable rent or mortgages, low salaries and soaring food prices, are becoming increasingly stressed as they try to budget for all levels of child-minding from infant to before-and-after school care.

Escalating fees that are outpacing inflation and a lack of spaces have created what child-care advocate Sharon Gregson calls a crisis on par with Vancouver's housing crunch. It's also why child-care affordability is likely to be in the spotlight at next week's Union of B.C. Municipalities convention in Victoria.

Forty-six municipalities and government agencies in B.C. have endorsed the \$10 a Day Child Care plan, including Vancouver in 2011, and this year there are three resolutions dealing with child-care affordability before the UBCM.

Gregson, a spokeswoman for the \$10 a Day Child Care campaign, says under their plan school-aged children would also be covered, as well as infant and toddler day care. She says with parents only paying \$10 a day for the provincially subsidized plan, they wouldn't stress out trying to schedule their vacation days to cover for the high number of Pro-D days and other scheduled days off from school.

Given the level of support for the plan, Gregson believes this will be one of the top three issues heading into next year's provincial election: "I think politicians will ignore this issue at their peril."

Some parents are racking up debt. Statistics Canada last week said that personal non-mortgage debt hit a record high (households held \$1.68 in credit market debt for every dollar of disposable income) this spring in Canada, the numbers boosted by the overheated housing and rental markets in Vancouver and Toronto.

Or, as B.C.'s Provincial Health Services Authority reported earlier this month, they are running out of food to feed their children before the next paycheck.

"I know people raising kids in basement suites," said Garrett. "It's not great living. Because child-care fees have to go up every year, people

can't keep up. It's so much more stressful than it has ever been."

Many B.C. mayors agree that the child-care problem has reached a tipping point, and they are pushing for the issue to be front and centre at next week's UBCM. Whistler, Vernon and the East Kootenay Regional District have put forth resolutions to be considered that deal with how unaffordable child care has become for most parents.

Vernon's resolution states that the federal and provincial governments make access to child care "a top priority" and work together to implement the new National Early Learning and Child Care Framework proposed by the federal government.

Whistler Mayor Jen Ford endorses the \$10 a day plan because she says Whistler is experiencing an unprecedented child-care shortage. As such, parents — mostly women — are leaving the workforce to stay at home, leaving a gap in skilled employees to fill positions.

The federal government, in its 2016 budget, promised to spend \$500 million next year on child care, and Ford wants the province to use that money to transition to a universal system overseen by the Education Ministry rather than the Ministry of Children and Families.

Tofino Mayor Josie Osborne agrees. Tofino passed a resolution last year to support the \$10 a day plan, and says while child-care costs come up at the UBCM every other year, she believes it is now a much more pressing issue.

"It feels like more people are being squeezed with affordability and housing costs, and more municipalities are calculating the living wage," she said. "In Tofino, we are stretched to the max and there are no child-care spaces."

The \$10 a day plan would allow people to start new day-care centres that pay living wages to staff, she said, and would enable more families to work so they can afford the cost of living.

In Surrey, for example, the demand for child-care spaces is at an estimated 12,000 children, said Gregson, a staggering number compared with the 2,400 new spaces that Minister of Children and Families Stephanie Cadieux says have been created in the province over the last two years.

"Middle class families are struggling. It's just as much of an issue as the housing crisis in Vancouver," said Gregson.

Cadieux was not available for an interview, but earlier this year said the \$10 or even \$15 a day child-care plan is "extremely cost prohibitive." She said the provincial budget doesn't have an additional \$1.5 to \$2.5 billion that she estimated it would cost to move toward a system of universal child care.

Cadieux said she recognizes that affordability is an ongoing challenge, and they are working with the federal government to find solutions.

The Ministry of Children and Families spends up to \$119.9 million annually on the Child Care Subsidy program, which currently supports about 20,000 children and their families each month in B.C. The B.C. Early Childhood Tax Benefit also supplements the subsidy program. Eligible families (those with net incomes under \$100,000) receive up to \$55 per month, or \$660 annually, for each child under the age of six.

The ministry has pledged to create 13,000 new licensed child-care spaces by 2020. Still, advocates say it's not enough and it doesn't ease affordability. Gregson said the government is ignoring the financial returns it will receive in taxes from more women in the workforce, and fewer parents receiving welfare.

Gregson points to Ontario, which recently announced 100,000 new spaces, with plans to invest billions in child care over the next five years, as a step in the right direction.

Several countries in Europe have universal plans, including Sweden, where parents do not pay more than three per cent of their income for licensed care. In Canada, only Quebec has such a plan. The province introduced a \$7 a day subsidized child care in 1997, although it is moving to a sliding scale based on income with rates maxing out at \$20 a day.

That means the top rate is still less than half of what families pay in Metro Vancouver (anywhere from \$45 to \$75 a day,) according to a Postmedia report.

The highest median rates for infant care in the country in 2014 were in Toronto at more than \$1,700 a month, according to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Vancouver was fifth highest, at \$1,200, after St. John's, NL, and the Greater Toronto Area cities of Brampton and Mississauga. Outside Quebec, Winnipeg was the lowest at about \$651 a month.

Vancouver city councillor Andrea Reimer is baffled by the B.C. government's refusal to move ahead with a universal plan. "It's not the money. There is so much research that shows the investment in early childhood learning will pay off," she said.

Reimer suspects that a lot of parents trying to budget for day care think they are alone in their struggle, that it is something they just have to get through. She also believes another barrier to making the \$10 a day plan happen is that voters who either don't have children or whose children are no longer in the school system may not identify with the scope of the crisis.

In a July 2016 report, a local legal group called B.C.'s access to affordable child care a human rights issue. The West Coast Legal Education and Action Fund's High Stakes study found that B.C.'s current state of child care "violates the rights of women and children" and calls on the provincial government to "take immediate steps to adopt and implement" the \$10 a day plan.

A 2008 Unicef report card comparing 25 OECD countries placed Canada second to last ahead of Ireland in child-care standards. The highest standard is found in Sweden, followed by Iceland, Denmark, Finland, France and Norway.

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