

Child care crunch

Staff shortage forces program closures

Meghan Waters with files from Suzanne Goldman

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A child-care crunch in Calgary has reached crisis levels, with parents scrambling as the start of school looms.

The situation is so dire one family is packing up and moving in order to find someone to take care of their kids while they work.

Day-care providers are turning away desperate families due to a lack of spaces made worse by a labour shortage and a fast-growing population.

Others are closing their doors altogether.

"We've looked at everything," said Christina Goodwin, who couldn't find two child-care spots for her daughter Maya, 2, and son Sam, 7.

"We've decided it would be a better option to move into an area that's slightly less expensive and we can actually get child care," said Goodwin, whose family moved from Bridlewood to Sundance.

"We found a nanny, but unfortunately she was just way too expensive. She was actually going to earn more than I did," added the mother, who's working two jobs to help support the family.

The Deer Run Out of School Program had to severely limit the number of children it is accepting because of staffing shortages.

See PARENTS, Page A6

Although the program is licensed for more than 100 children, it has only accepted half that number, the maximum it can care for with four staff members.

"We are trying to hire, and we're getting nowhere," said the centre's Susan Read. "The parents that have been in our program are anxious to make sure we stay open."



CREDIT: Dean Bicknell, Calgary Herald

Although the Deer Run Out of School program is licensed for more than 100 children, it only accepted half that number due to a staff shortage.

Kidzinc, which operates around the city, has cut two of its kindergarten programs because providers couldn't meet the higher staff-to-child ratios required for younger children.

"If it's not safe, we really can't do it," said a Kidzinc spokeswoman, who declined to give her name.

Recruitment efforts have failed and staff retention is difficult, she said.

"You'll have the problem solved one day, and the very next day things have fallen apart on you," the spokeswoman said.

Penny Morelyle came home Wednesday to a voice-mail message from Kidzinc telling her the kindergarten program was cancelled.

Her daughter, Rowan, 6, spent all summer looking forward to attending the Westgate after-school program where her older brother Aidan always seemed to have fun.

"She was devastated, absolutely devastated," said Morelyle, who registered her daughter for the program last spring.

Morelyle said the current federal government made the wrong decision when it scrapped the Liberals' child-care plan and decided to give parents money each month instead.

"I don't want money in my pocket, I want good-quality child care, she said.

Some of the parents affected by the Kidzinc closure have talked about quitting their jobs, she said.

"Before- and after-school (care) is a big problem," said Tanya Szarko, spokeswoman for the Day Care Society of Alberta.

The group wants children aged from six to 12 to get the same funding as younger children.

"Alberta child care is struggling," she said.

Alberta Children's Services is reviewing its approach to before and after school care, a spokeswoman said.

"Our mandate and our policy has been largely in that zero to six range," said department spokeswoman Jody Korchinski. "We are committed to discussing this further with the child-care community and other partners to see how we can support out-of-school care."

But she acknowledged the province has no plans to step in to offer solutions to the growing problem.

An 800-person-strong parents' lobby group is demanding high-quality care for children from infants to age 12.

"There are some really good-quality child-care centres (for young children), but they're hard to find. Then at the school age, it just drops off," said Karen Mikkelsen of Parents for Quality Education.

Mikkelborg, who is using a nanny service, said the province needs to accommodate single working parents and dual-income families.

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