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Day cares closing doors to babies

Infant service not cost-effective, say operators

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Day-care centres are quietly looking to get out of the baby business as the ongoing labour crunch collides with the city's baby boom.

"It's being discussed because it's so much more difficult to provide that care," says Traudi Kelm, president of the Alberta Day Care Society. "I know many centres are looking to eliminate those spaces because of the difficulties in attracting staff."

Enmax recently opened an on-site child care centre in response to staff struggles to find affordable, convenient preschool care. One of the most poignant examples was a couple who sent their child to live with relatives in China after being unable to find a child care solution in the city that worked for their situation.

"That's a snapshot of the crisis in day care in Calgary," said Janice Strelow, wellness co-ordinator for the utility.

But Enmax hasn't been immune from the staffing problems facing other operations. Although licensed for 80 children, the YMCA-operated centre is less than half full because it has been unable to attract enough qualified care givers.

Those in the business say baby care is just not cost-effective.

"We lose money providing the service," said Tanya Szarko, executive director at Bow Valley Child Care, where infant care is \$1,115 a month.

The scarcity of child care workers has been a problem for years, as many have been lured away by rising wages in other fields. And caring for babies requires more staff: a ratio of one worker for three infants. That rises to 1-6 for toddlers 19 months to three years, and 1-8 for children up to four years.

Space for babies is at such a premium that women are putting their names on waiting lists if they are even considering pregnancy, while couples only half-jokingly sign up on their honeymoon.

Once lampooned as a social status rite for New York professionals, it's become serious reality.

"It's definitely become a Calgary thing -- even an Alberta thing," says Kelm.

More than 15,700 babies were born in 2006-07, and the city's hospitals are on track to deliver another 16,800 little ones by the end of the fiscal year March 31.

Those mothers choosing to go back to work are vying for 700 regulated infant spaces at child care centres and another 432 spots at regulated day homes.

More than 500 families are on the wait list for any space at Szarko's Bow Valley Child Care, located in the heart of downtown's corporate office towers. About 90 per cent of those are seeking one of the 18 licensed spots for children under 19 months.

Estimated wait time? Anywhere from one to three years, depending on the age of your child.

Krista Zsako was caught off guard by the difficulty of finding somewhere she feels confident leaving six-month-old Noah.

Zsako began researching child care options when she was pregnant and couldn't find a day-care centre or a day home willing to take children under 12 months. But even the places she did find were too expensive.

"It's a nightmare," said the 25-year-old mom, an architectural technologist whose husband David is on parental leave until March 1.

"They want more than \$50 a day," she said. "Young people like us, we can't afford that. We'd need three parents working to pay for day care."

A family friend is willing to take Noah into her home, but Zsako is advertising online at www.calgaryparents.com in hopes of finding a closer location to avoid a daily commute that will add more than an hour to the little tyke's day.

Numbers of spots for children under 19 months -- never in huge supply -- began to slide in 2000 after a federal expansion of parental leave benefits meant many mothers could stay home for almost a year.

Downtown Calgary is awash in construction sites for new office towers, but very few of those are planning to include day-care centres for their staff or tenants.

Szarko says that has to change and it may only happen when too many companies find their female staff unable to return to work after having a baby.

The Alberta government has been topping up wages for child care workers to help with the shortfall. That's led to an additional 440 more child care professionals across the province in the last year -- 126 who have agreed to come back to the industry.

The province is also paying child care operators a \$1,500 bonus for every new space created, which has meant an additional 182 spaces in Calgary.

"We know we have work to do, but it's going in the right direction," said Children Services spokesman Cathy Ducharme.

Calgary Economic Development notes that 80 per cent of women in their prime childbearing years (aged 25 to 44) were working in 2005 -- slightly above the

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