

## **Access to Quality, Affordable Early Learning and Child Care**

Canada has committed to ensuring women's full participation in society and in the workforce<sup>1</sup>, something that requires access to affordable, quality early learning and child care (ELCC). Yet, even as one of the wealthiest countries in the world, and without any identifiable barriers to fulfilling this obligation, Canada has failed to make this right a reality. Instead, Canada is consistently awarded the lowest possible grades in ELCC.

Women are disproportionately responsible for child care, one of the key barriers that mothers face in getting themselves and their children out of poverty is the lack of access to affordable, quality ELCC. To fulfill their obligations to women and children, governments must prioritize quality ELCC programs.

The Women's Centre has been working to advocate for social and economic policies that reflect the realities and experiences of women in Calgary. Through ongoing events and consultation, women have consistently identified child care as priority. As a result, this is one of the policy focuses of the Women's Centre.

### **Early Learning and Child Care Today**

Although the government has made multiple promises to create a national child care program in the last thirty years, ELCC in Canada remains a primarily market-driven sector. As was the case in the 1980s, the situation remains critical.

Today, ELCC falls under the jurisdiction of both the federal and provincial governments, with the provinces maintaining primary responsibility for the funding and delivery of services. In Alberta, the Ministry of Human Services is responsible for child care and the Ministry of Education is responsible for Early Childhood Services including kindergarten. Monitoring and licensing of regulated child care is shared by ten Child and Family Services Authorities offices and eighteen Delegated First Nation Agencies. Both for-profit and non-profit services operate in Alberta, with 50 per cent of child care owned by private, for-profit organizations.

Under this model, municipalities in Alberta have seen a decrease in power over the last few decades and have been forced to pull funding for municipal programming that once provided parents with access to affordable, quality ELCC (Muttart Foundation, Nov. 2011). Today, only four municipalities operate or support child care (Ibid). This gap in service was compounded by Alberta's traditionally low investment in ELCC: Alberta's spending on child care is the third lowest of the provinces (Moore-Kilgannon, 2015).

Beginning in 2008, Alberta began taking steps to improve funding, including funding to support the creation of new child care spaces and wage enhancements for staff in accredited child care centres and family day homes. In 2012, the province increased the income threshold for maximum child care subsidies from \$35,100 to \$50,000. However, the need is so great that even this progress leaves Alberta far from meeting its goal of ensuring that all families have access to affordable, quality learning and care.

### **Women's Poverty and Child Care**

In August 2014, Calgary was named one of the top five most livable cities in the world (The Economist Intelligence Unit, August 2014)—a surprising recognition given that in the same year, Calgary was also named one of the worst cities to be a woman in Canada, rating 17 out of 20 (McInturff, April 2014). This ranking was largely due to Calgary's poor performance in employment, income, and leadership with high barriers for women to achieve success (Ibid). A province that once championed women's rights, Alberta now boasts the largest overall gender wage gap in the country, with women underrepresented in leadership and

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<sup>1</sup> [See, for example, the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women \(CEDAW\), which Canada ratified in 1981.](#)

overrepresented in minimum wage positions that do not provide a living wage (Lampert, 2015). The lack of affordable child care is barrier to women's participation in the workforce (Lahey, 2015).

In addition, lone parent families have poverty rates double those of the general population and women account for 80 per cent of single-parent led families. If we consider that single mothers have an average net worth of approximately \$17,000 while single fathers have a net worth of approximately \$80,000 (Canadian Women's Foundation, May 2013, p. 2) and earn on average approximately \$20,000 more per year than single mothers, then we can assume that the poverty rate for single mothers is much higher than lone parent family estimates. Single mothers are the poorest of the poor, and the current child care market reinforces this poverty.

### **Barriers to Accessible ELCC**

*"I have to try to save money for my child, but I don't know how. I can't save it. I have to pay daycare, groceries, transportation, and after [age] six, he also needs a bus ticket and I can't afford it. I can't save for him for his future."*

- Women's Centre Child Care interview participant, 2015

*"The job starts at 7:00 a.m. but the daycare doesn't open until 6:45 therefore her son sleeps at his grandparents' home every work night and the grandmother drops him off at daycare every morning on her way to work...What do single mothers without family support living on minimum wage do to survive?"*

- Women's Centre Child Care interview participant, 2015

The following are barriers to universal access:

#### **1. Affordability**

The monthly cost of ELCC per child in Calgary is comparable to the cost of rent or a mortgage, and the annual cost of ELCC can be substantially more than one year of university tuition. Costs are age-dependent with higher costs associated with younger children. In Calgary, women can expect to spend 26% of their income on child care costs (Macdonald & Friendly, Nov. 2014, p. 22, Table 5). The median child care fees are \$1050 for infants, \$936 for toddlers, and \$924 for preschoolers (Macdonald & Friendly, 2014, p. 22, Table 5)

The average part-time and drop-in dayhome rate is \$50-\$65 per day (Day Homes in Calgary, 2015). These costs do not include waitlist, registration, or additional annual fees. Costs continue as children go to part-day kindergarten and then grade school, where parents often need to consider before and after-school care.

Even with the subsidy threshold increase in 2012, subsidies remain inadequate. For example, the maximum daycare subsidy amounts are \$628 for infants (1-18 months) and \$546 for toddlers (beginning at 19 months) and kindergarten; the maximum day home amounts are \$520 for infants and \$437 for toddlers and kindergarten students. (Government of Alberta).

Even with a maximum subsidy, parents are still required to pay hundreds of dollars in ELCC each month. Take, for example, a 2012 estimate budget for a single mother in Calgary with one three-year-old child, working full-time for minimum wage and receiving eligible benefits (United Way of Calgary and Area et. al., 2012). In this scenario, the single mother faces an unavoidable, ongoing monthly deficit amounting to an annual shortfall of \$2436 (Ibid). It's worth noting that this estimate was before the post-flood housing crisis, includes only one child, and assumes that the woman was able to secure a regulated (subsidized) child care space. All things considered, a \$2436 deficit could be an optimal outcome for a low-income single mother.

Child care in Calgary is not only out of reach for low-wage income earners, but for middle-income earners as well. A 2013 estimate using CRA tax calculations/CMHC guidelines indicates that a family in Calgary with an infant would need to earn at least \$72,000 annually in order to cover the average cost of living (McDougall-Sutherland, 2013). Yet, the current income threshold for a maximum subsidy is \$50,000. This gap places middle-income families in a precarious position. All things considered, affordable child care in Calgary remains out of reach for many.

## **2. Availability of ELCC Spaces**

In addition to the high barrier cost of ELCC, there is also a shortage of regulated ELCC spaces. This situation is not unique to Calgary, but is characteristic of what is being described as a national child care bust. The child care market model is failing as it has failed for the last 30 years.

Access to regulated ELCC is even more of a challenge as there are only enough regulated spaces for 20 per cent of children aged 0-5 years and 15 per cent of children aged 0-12 years. In 2014, 63 percent of child care providers in Alberta had wait-lists (Public Interest Alberta). We also know that in Alberta, “the number of preschool children with a mother in the work force who did not have access to licensed child care went from 69,368 in 2004 to 87,281 in 2010” (Public Interest Alberta). In Alberta, 49 percent of women working part-time choose to do so because they cannot find affordable child care (Macdonald, & Friendly, 2014).

This shortage of regulated ELCC provides a particular challenge to those in need of financial assistance, as only regulated providers are eligible to receive subsidies—a challenge compounded by the child care market’s tendency to provide increased services in communities that can afford to pay more. Similarly, there is a lack of ELCC spaces that accommodate evening and shift work, which tends to impact low-income women the most.

In addition to disadvantaging women living in poverty, access to ELCC is also unequal for other groups of marginalized women. For example, First Nations and immigrant women often lack the culturally appropriate services that they require, and access to ELCC for children with disabilities and other special needs remains limited. As women in marginalized groups often experience higher incidence of poverty, the challenges facing marginalized women can form interlocking oppressions that push access to affordable, quality ELCC out of reach.

## **3. Part-Day Kindergarten**

Kindergarten is an important stepping stone to school for many children, and Calgary has excellent kindergarten programs. However, most public schools in Calgary only offer part-time kindergarten programs. While the city targets full-time programming to the communities that would most benefit from this service, if a parent does not live in a designated community, they cannot access a full-day program. This can mean choosing between the sometimes impossible juggling of before-school care, part-day kindergarten, and after-school care, and denying a child this meaningful experience.

## **Barriers to Quality ELCC**

### **1. Lack of Regulated ELCC Spaces**

While not all unregulated ELCC is problematic, unregulated ELCC lacks quality and safety monitoring. Thus, the lack of regulated ELCC means that “for many parents the only available option is unregulated child care with no public oversight—a ‘choice’ that occasionally turns harmful or deadly” (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2014, p.1).

### **2. Private, For-Profit ELCC and Quality Staff**

When private investors view ELCC as a business opportunity, profits may be placed before quality. Early childhood educators in Canada earn 55% of the wages of women with an equivalent level of education (Rethink Childcare, n.d.). It’s also worth noting that as the ELCC sector primarily employs women, the child care market disadvantages women on two counts: as mothers and as workers.

## What Access to Affordable, Quality ELCC Could Do for Women

Access to quality, affordable child care can change women's lives.

An improved child care system could reduce women's poverty. Affordable, accessible, quality ELCC could:

- Free up enough income for a woman to meet her fundamental needs, or create an emergency fund, or save for the future
- Lower the barriers for women with children to attain the education or training necessary to secure improved employment

When women are living in poverty, we also know that this impacts:

- **Her health**—women living in poverty are more vulnerable to acute and chronic health conditions and mental illness. Social and economic stresses, along with inequitable burdens imposed upon a woman by role expectations, often have a negative impact on her health, happiness and potential for personal fulfillment.
- **Her safety**—lack of economic opportunities is a contributing factor for women living in abusive relationships. Because lack of affordable child care is often mentioned as one of the barriers to leaving an abusive relationship, access to child care will support women and children's safety.
- **Her opportunities**— without affordable child care, women have fewer choices when it comes to employment, education or training.
- **Her children**—addressing women's poverty by improving access to affordable child care will have a direct impact on reducing child poverty.

*"I have a neighbour with three kids—she has been in Canada for years but couldn't go to English classes because she didn't have anyone to look after her children. Her husband lost his job and she was finally able to go to class because he could take care of the kids, but now they don't have the income."*

- Women's Centre Child Care interview participant, 2015

*"I am forced to stay at home because I don't have child care."*

- Women's Centre Child Care interview participant, 2015

## Recommendations

The Women's Centre suggests the following actions in order to create the conditions for an environment that welcome and promotes affordable, quality child care:

1. **Transition to a provincial ELCC program.** Research indicates that a publicly funded system would benefit both women in particular and the economy at large. For example, Quebec's \$7/day child care plan has resulted in more women participating in the economic workforce as well as a net economic benefit to the government (Fortin, 2012).
2. **Increase support and funding for municipal ELCC centres.** The overall supply of ELCC is inadequate, access is unequal across regions in the province, and the quality of some existing programs is a concern.
3. **Increase control over child care and funding for childcare by municipalities.** The fiscal relationship between the province and municipalities results in municipalities having limited revenues to support ELCC.
4. **Implement more public before and after-school care programs.**
5. **Encourage child care that addresses the diverse needs of Albertans.** Programs and funding for First Nations and immigrant families are needed to address their exceptional needs and challenges in accessing quality child care. More funding for spaces for children with disabilities are required to ensure that they have a right to quality education and care.

6. **Ensure accountability/transparency in reporting (on federal transfers).** Increased transparency and accountability is needed in order for the public to understand how federal funds designated for child care are spent.
7. **Increase access to emergency respite care.** The emergency respite care system in Calgary is unable to meet demand. Women tell us that in times of crisis, consistent access to quality child care is essential in securing the fundamental needs for her and her children. For example, women leaving abuse and women with serious illness have special circumstances that require access to flexible, quality respite.
8. **Address policy paradoxes.** For example, women in need of a subsidy are often required to pay a ELCC provider upfront in order to secure a spot for the their child, yet a subsidy cannot be requested until that ELCC provider confirms registration.
9. **Provide support for school transition.** Program, services, and professionally trained individuals are required to support children transitioning into a school setting.
10. **Establish regulations for quality home care.** Creating legislation around home care will ensure both private and public services are held to the same level of evaluation in providing care for children.
11. **Create partnerships between the public and private sector.** A forum of collaboration, discussion, and innovation is required to encourage clear lines of communication between the municipality, school boards, and services providers.

*“He always says, ‘I don’t want to go.’ I don’t know if he will like the new daycare, that’s the only problem—because if he likes the daycare, I feel relief. If he doesn’t, I feel a little bit tense. Why [doesn’t he] like it? Some daycares are good, but some, no. I’m not in daycare the whole time; I just drop him off and pick him up.”*

- Women’s Centre Child Care interview participant, 2015

*“In that program they have all the meals, but he don’t like them [because he’s not used to that kind of food] so I have to prepare all of the meals...”*

- Women’s Centre Child Care interview participant, 2015

*“All of my experiences with child care have been so stressful and connected to other stresses in my life—the ability to pay bills, and to know that I can’t be late on child care because I will lose that spot, and if I lose that spot I will lose my job.”*

- Women’s Centre Child Care interview participant, 2015

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