

BC PARENTS ADD THEIR VOICES

MAY IS CHILD CARE MONTH

As we all begin thinking about the important issues for the Provincial Election on May 17th, we can also remember that May is Child Care Month. As we head into BC's next provincial election I can't help but think about some of the issues most important to me. One of them is childcare. I am a 30-year-old single mum with one school-aged child. I am one of BC's inner-city, 'working poor'. I rely on childcare to allow me to work, to volunteer, to maintain a household, and to remain sane. The impact of provincial government cuts to public sector jobs, cuts in access to the childcare system, changes to the childcare subsidy program, and the decrease in funding for out-of-school programs are all things that will be on my mind when I vote in our next provincial election.

Something like 70% of provincial public sector workers are female. Women are also the largest group in society to rely on public services. Hence, cutbacks, downsizing, and changes to employment standards have adversely affected women's ability to participate in BC's now "booming" economy, as well as their ability to care for their children. In my case, I lost my somewhat 'secure' and decent paying Ministry of Human Resources job for a less secure, part-time position (read 34hrs/week) in the private sector where low paying, entry level, and part-time positions are on the rise. Now I make slightly too much money to be eligible for childcare subsidy, but not enough to pay for after school care. The current provincial government hampered access to childcare services in my neighborhood with the end of the "One Stop Access" program and then they lowered the income threshold level to qualify for subsidy. This means many of us who are living paycheck to paycheck are finding it increasingly difficult to keep our children in safe, quality childcare, the very childcare that ensures our participation in the workforce. The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, as well as the Early Development Instrument, identified Vancouver's working class east side as one of the most under served communities when it comes to childcare accessibility. It is also one of the neighborhoods where quality care would have the greatest benefits in terms of child development. This makes me wonder about the priorities of the provincial government. How many other East Vancouver women like me have not been able to find a way to balance, beg, or borrow their way through the last few years? What about those women and families who have been forced to utilize poor quality, unregulated childcare (or no childcare) by virtue of affordability? How does this impact our children, and our community, in both the short and long term?

Children needing extra support took an even harder hit under our Liberal government. When initiatives like the supported childcare program are cut, it is our at-risk children that suffer the most. Risk factors like poverty, poor nutrition, lack of social housing, and lack of quality childcare don't just add up, they multiply! Children with developmental delays, behavioural issues, mental health issues, and physical disabilities need our investment in their social and psychological well being. Quality childcare is a protective factor and it must be recognized and supported accordingly. This also includes acknowledging that the wages for those working in the childcare sector are too low, working hours are long, and benefits are inadequate. We need sufficient numbers of trained staff in order to ensure the inclusion and participation of children with language barriers,

disabilities, children from low-income families, and children with other specific needs. Quality childcare starts with quality staff who have the resources and supports they need to do their jobs.

Over the last four or so years the BC government has received close to \$250 million dollars for early childhood programs. Yet, in the same time period the BC government has cut its own childcare budget. This year the funding will be about 20% less than in 2001/2002. Some politicians have purposed tax cuts to lessen the burden for working families and increase financial access to childcare. Tax cuts aren't helpful to people like me. They don't create spaces or quality and they are only useful if you have a high enough income and a childcare spot in the first place. What I really need is a commitment. My child needs a commitment. One-time initiatives are not sufficient to meet the needs of British Columbia's children now or into the future, they are a Band-Aid solution and an election ploy. One of my psychology professors at SFU always used to say that the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour!

Childcare programs in BC are under funded and unstable, barriers to access are tremendous, and children are the ones who suffer the harshest consequences. As I said, when it comes time to vote May 17th I'll have a lot on my mind, what about you?

Emily Mayne
East Vancouver Parent

Accessing subsidy - it is not working to help those that need it most.

What we have now is a system that just doesn't work for the very people who need it most. And here's what it is really like.

The Child Care Subsidy Application process has been completely removed from the Vancouver Community offices of the Ministry of Human Resources (MHR). All Vancouver parents must deal with an office based in Richmond...it means they cannot interface with a real person, face to face, and it means parents rarely have a direct conversation. Parents are experiencing that most communication between a family and a subsidy worker is now via paperwork and "telephone tag".

I was told that there are 7 MHR staff to do the work that 20 workers did 2 years ago when Vancouver had several One Stop Access programs and outreach workers who worked in the neighbourhoods. Not only are these 7 MHR staff doing child care subsidy, but they are also dealing with Welfare caseloads.

For a family, applying for child care subsidy, getting a child care authorization can take months and for child care programs this can mean once accepting a child into the program, having to carry large debts until they receive subsidy payments.

Here's the typical procedure - a parent must phone and ask for what they want, even though they don't know what they might qualify for or be the least bit familiar with what they are entitled to. A package is then mailed out to the parent to complete and return to the Richmond office. We have heard from some families that the packages they received did not contain all the forms required, and that meant another delay occurred while they waited for all the required forms.

Apparently the local community situated MHR offices are not allowed to keep

and distribute the appropriate forms!

Add to the complexity if the parent speaks English as a second/third language or is not literate.

Families learn that despite many political promises and statements, the subsidy 'system' is not working to support families that need it most.

Family: a single Mother with an eighteen month old son returning to the workforce faced numerous barriers.

As soon as she got the job, she applied for subsidy. But she ended up waiting and received no subsidy for the first two months. In the meantime, the daycare required payment for these first two months. But given she had just returned to work, she had no extra money for the full fee. The cost of the care was more than the maximum subsidy she hoped to get and all she could manage to pay for the first two months was her parent portion.

The daycare told her she would have to remove her child if an authorization from subsidy office was not received and they did not get the full subsidy amount owing. She called the Ministry office numerous times and received only a voice mail message.

The Ministry worker returned the call and left a voice mail as the mother was at work in the daytime. They never had a direct conversation.

It turns out there was a portion of the application that the Mother did not complete properly...so her application was returned to her after waiting for 2 months.

It got even more complicated. She worked split shifts during the day and finished work at 6 pm. It took her at least a half an hour to get from work to the daycare which closes at 6pm. She did not know what to do.

She did not know that she might be eligible for "combination care" -- for subsidy that covers the fee for group care where the child was during the day, plus another subsidy for a family child care provider who could pick up the child and care for him until Mother finished work and travelled to pick up her son.

Instead, the Mother thinks her only choice is to arrange for a second daycare arrangement and pay for it herself or quit her job. In the end she cannot find anyone to do the pick up, because she cannot afford to pay for this additional cost. She realizes she has no choices but to leave her job so that she can take care of her child.

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Family of 4: mother, father, and 2 children, one 6 year old and one 3 year old.

Father is working full time Monday to Friday from 8:30 to 4:30. His income varies from month to month often from very high to very low, depending on demand, as he is on-call.

They apply for subsidy for their 3 year old child who has special needs and requires the added interaction with peers. He is speech delayed and preschool is recommended.

After completing the subsidy application as described in the package received in

the mail, the family is turned down for subsidy. Why? Because the parent worked a lot that particular month and his earnings were high. No one suggests to him that he should continue to submit his paystubs as they vary so much and the Ministry has the ability to average his income over a period of months.

The family pays for the preschool at great expense to the family because they believe it is necessary for their son to improve, but this added cost in monthly expenses puts a great deal of financial stress on the family.

After several months and much financial hardship, they ask to have their application reconsidered and they learn that they not only qualify for subsidy but also they now learn that they qualify for the special needs supplement as well.

Only after great hardship is the family finally helped and they are confident they can continue the care their child needs.

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Family : single mother with a 3 year old.

The child is already enrolled in full - time family child care and Mother is informed that she is no longer going to receive subsidy when her income exceeds \$1,500/month.

After paying rent (\$600/mth and paying for childcare (\$500/mth) she has \$600/mth to live on (that includes her child tax benefit).

She carries with great financial hardship. No one informs her that the subsidy system changed in 2005 and that she might now qualify for subsidy. Eventually she attends a mothers' support group and there she learns of the changes.

The possibility of closing the two Camosun College child-care centres, one at the Lansdowne campus and one at Interurban in Victoria, came up last June, 2004. Camosun College administrators initially recommended closure after 18 years because of changing financial priorities for the college and rising child care costs to sustain high quality child care programs.

A campaign to keep the two child care program was launched by a coalition of groups including parents, CUPE [Canadian Union of Public Employees] and regional child care advocates. Hundreds of people signed an on-line petition, sent letters and e-mails to the board, members of parliament and provincial MLAs. This included the Saanich City Council signing a proclamation encouraging the College Administration to ensure quality affordable childcare would remain at Camosun College.

Students, parents and day-care staff led a demonstration against the closings - many families said that their ability to attend college depended on them being able to access the Camosun child care programs!

Parents, explained that quality child care that is responsive to the student parents is essential to the well being of their children and a critical support while they focus on their studies. Speakers explained:

- accessing affordable, quality child care at the College sites is an access-to-education issue for students with young children;
- a quality child care system promotes the healthy development of all children;
- access to quality child care supports families, complements parenting and

contributes to the capacity of women and parents to achieve.

One year later, March 2005, after a slow start to the Task Force initiation, the Board met to hear their recommendations. Child care advocates, many accompanied by young children, filled a Camosun College Board of Governors meeting.

Parents and child care workers are very pleased that the Board of Governors has made a commitment to keep the centres open. The commitment comes from the stakeholders agreeing to provide levies and revenue to assist the centres. CUPE 2081 has committed \$10, 000 per year for three years and is in the process of negotiating some minor details with regards to workers hours being extended and substitution pay. The Faculty have committed to \$25, 000 per year for three years as their contribution. Students have agreed to take a levy increase to their student body for consideration bringing their contribution up to approximately \$90, 000 per year. These contributions will assist the college administration in bringing funding levels more in line with other comparable institutions.

CUPE 2081 has also asked for an audit of the Childcare centres finances in order to understand the college's increased investment in childcare over the past 8 years and why it was not raised sooner if it was a problem for the college's overall financial picture.

Louise Oetting
Chief Shop Steward CUPE Local 2081
Camosun College, Victoria BC

When I was pregnant with our first child, my husband and I knew that we would need full time childcare when I was to return to work after my year maternity leave. It was important to us that we had a licensed daycare, and also a group daycare. In Richmond, BC, there isn't a lot of choice to meet these criteria. We knew that waiting lists for daycare spaces were extremely long and spaces were at a premium. Three months before our daughter was born (15 months before I would need a spot), I put our name on a waiting list for a group daycare that I knew had an excellent reputation. I also later put our name on some other daycare lists in hopes that I would get a spot at least somewhere.

Ten months after putting our name on the waiting list, we were offered a spot at the group daycare we had hoped for. Although we were happy, the first problem we encountered came when the spot we were offered was to start in January, three months before we needed it and before I was even to return to work. We were told that we could turn it down and stay on the waiting list, but there was no guarantee when they would have another spot to offer us. We worried, how were we to pay for three months worth of daycare (\$2700) that we weren't going to use, when I was off work, and on a very limited income through EI? It was very stressful, but we didn't want to risk losing the spot and not having any childcare. We could not have afforded to take the spot if my parents hadn't been able to help us and pay for those three months. As an aside, no other daycare facilities (family or group) called to offer a spot, so thankfully, we had accepted the spot.

When I was three months pregnant with our second child, I put my name on the waiting list at the daycare we were at. I had my name down 18 months before I needed the spot to ensure we would have both our children at the same facility, and hoped that we would get a spot when we needed it (and not much sooner).

The next challenge that came about was - and still is - trying to pay the daycare costs for both of our children. There are no subsidies and no discounts for two children, so we pay \$1500 a month for the two of them to be at daycare and receive quality child care, while my husband and I must both work full time to try and make ends meet. \$1500 a month is equivalent to paying another mortgage payment! Needless to say - it's a struggle financially for us. Quality childcare is so important, but problems like wait lists, limited spaces and especially cost, make it hard for parents to access it, and to keep up with the costs of daycare as well as the rest of life's costs.

Michele Tedford
Richmond, BC

I am a director of a child care centre for 3-5 year olds in Vancouver and it's spring time and/or dealing with the waitlist time again.

I am writing because I am shocked at the situation so many families are facing this year. Is there no affordable, accessible space?

No there certainly isn't.

I get four to five calls a day. That's PER DAY from parents looking for child care and there isn't any out there. Parents are desperate, angry and shocked when I tell them if they want to go on the waitlist they MIGHT have a chance at September 2006. I have even been offered bribes and I don't blame parents. Our situation is critical in Vancouver - for a centre with 25 licensed spaces, we have over 75 children on the waitlist for 10 available spaces in September 2005.

The centre's monthly fees per child are \$685. The way the provincial child care subsidy works for low income earners, even if a family is eligible for the maximum amount of child care subsidy i.e. \$394 a month for a 3-5 year old in a child care centre, it only helps the family to meet part of the real child care costs. The family still has to be able to pay \$291 a month, to equal the difference between the Centre's monthly fees and the child care subsidy they are receiving from the Ministry of Human Resources.

Ann Silberman

We have our son in daycare two days a week. This is financially very challenging as I am on maternity leave. We waited over a year for that spot to come available, as he is under age three and spaces for children that young are so hard to find. But we were afraid of losing this hard-to-come-by spot.

We also have twin daughters who are just under a year old. Once my maternity benefits run out, we can not really afford for me to work full time, because the cost of putting three children in full time care would be more than my monthly earnings, but neither can we afford for me not to work. My partner's income alone is not sufficient to support our household. We are not sure what we will do once our twins turn one and my mat leave is over.

I have two children, one almost 6, the other 2. My 2 year old is in a downtown group daycare for which we pay high fees but we are very happy with the care he gets. I put him on the waiting list 9 months before he was born and he got a spot one month after his first birthday! He gets loving, quality care and looks forward to going every day.

My older child went through several child care scenarios before we found her a good group spot at 2 years of age - as new parents we did not know about the waiting list scenarios and were totally unprepared for the crazy world of inconsistent care, lack of spaces, etc. She went through small in-home daycares, a private child-minding service which was a bit of a disaster, cobbled together with my mother watching her a few days a week.

At 2 & 1/2 we got her into a group daycare full-time and were relieved. She thrived in the group environment and the stability. Now she is in Kindergarten and attending the after-school care program there so her life with childcare goes on. Her name is still on the wait list at some infant/toddler programs: they call me periodically to see if we still need the spot and I have to laugh as I tell them no thanks, they are 5 years too late!

My husband and I work full-time at middle-to-upper income levels. We struggle with the childcare costs -- the monthly childcare costs for two kids is more than our home mortgage payment!

We know they have received stimulation and socialization they never would have received had one of us decided to stay home from work to care for them ourselves. No more kids, though for us....in a city like Vancouver, it's just too expensive!

Clare Cullen