

Crisis in Alberta Daycare

How has the care of our children become such a low priority?

by Cheryl Mahaffy

As usual, some families hoping to put their children in daycare with the Red Deer Child Care Society ended up on a waiting list last fall. But for the first time ever, their disappointment was caused not only by lack of licensed slots, but by lack of staff. Needing 13 new staff members, executive director Noreen Spencer could find only nine; within three weeks, five more had resigned.

What's worse, the staffing gap is part of a pattern. Increasingly, Spencer is forced to hire caregivers with less than the two-year diploma her society requires, only to watch them leave in search of more money and less stress. "Staff soon realize the work here is draining, and the economy has picked up all over Alberta. So even people who really want to work with children are soon saying, 'I don't need this amount of responsibility for just \$6 or \$8 an hour; I can go to Sears or Wal-Mart for that money,'" Spencer says.

Inevitably, the revolving door



affects the 700 children served by her society's two daycare centres, 16 before- and after-school programs and network of day homes.

"Turnover chews up a tremendous amount of staff time and money," Spencer says. "That whole milieu of trying to support the parents and provide creative programming takes a back burner to recruiting, training and mentoring new staff."

The children served by Red Deer daycares are far from alone in suffering the consequences. Half of the directors and day home agencies in *You Bet I Care*, an extensive cross-Canada study released in 2000, said they have problems finding qualified permanent staff. In Alberta, which holds the dubious distinction of having the highest turnover rate in the

country, nearly half of all caregivers (44.8 per cent) leave their posts within a year.

"Given what we know about the connections between continuity of care and quality, that's a shocking, shocking statistic," says Jane Hewes, chair of the Grant MacEwan Early Childhood Development Program in Edmonton. "The shortage in the field is absolutely critical."

Ironically, the staffing crisis

appears to be deepening at the very time when an expanding body of research confirms the crucial role played by pre-school experiences in setting a path for life. Seventy per cent of a brain's development occurs after birth, the majority of that in the first three years of life, notes Dianne Dalley, manager of preventive services with Alberta's

Ministry of Children's Services. "No matter where they are, our children should have optimal care."

In an economy where more than 65 per cent of preschool children need regular care outside their homes, daycare is perfectly positioned to offer such care and stimulation—while extending a lifeline of support to increasingly stressed parents. Far from meeting that potential, however, fully two-thirds of Canada's centres and family day homes in the *You Bet I Care* study neglected to provide the enriching environment needed to spur social, language and thinking skills. The gap was especially acute in rooms serving infants and toddlers.

On the positive side, the study found that staff in most daycares,

“Given the importance of early childhood education and nutrition to the intellectual and physical development of all human beings, a national effort to provide high quality daycare for every child who needs it would be one of the wisest investments Canada could make in its future.”

— DAVID K. FOOT AND DANIEL STOFFMAN, *Boom, Bust and Echo*

Alberta included, are warm and supportive, and keep children safe. Annette LaGrange, dean of the faculty of education at the University of Calgary and one of the study’s authors, credits the excellent training programs, model centres and strong advocates that took root in pre-cut-back years.

Yet the fact that most daycares have not progressed past custodial care represents “thousands of lost opportunities,” the study concludes, and improvement will occur only by paying attention to the people who work with our children every day. “It is the child care workforce that serves as the major engine on the road towards achieving quality child care in Canada, and it is the nature of the difficult and restrictive conditions under which the workforce operates that is the major obstacle to quality.”

You Bet I Care found that three factors most strongly predict staff’s ability to provide quality daycare: livable income, appropriate training and supportive networks. Our province entered the 21st century hobbled on all three fronts.

Livable income

Wages for Alberta daycare workers averaged \$8.36 per hour in 1998, significantly lower than the national average of \$11.62 and barely above the low-income cutoff (LICO) often used to measure poverty. If you were a child caregiver in Alberta, you’d earn no more than a parking lot attendant.

Some observers link Alberta’s particularly low average wages to the fact that 60 per cent of our daycares are for-profit enterprises, compared to just 24 per cent across the nation. In entrepreneurial Calgary, which

has the province’s highest concentration of for-profits, average wage is \$7.50 an hour.

Besides causing financial stress, rock-bottom wages reflect demoralizing attitudes about the worth of child care as a profession, notes Judy Dubé, chair of the Child and Family Resource Association (CAFRA), a unique Edmonton-based network that accredits centres meeting high standards. “We really make a difference in the lives of children and families. But our work is physically demanding and emotionally draining. If we don’t get rewarded financially and people don’t view what we do as important, it’s doubly hard.”

Caregivers involved in an Edmonton-based daycare Diversity and Health project echoed those words, describing “a bleak existence, characterized by day to day struggles as breadwinners in their own families, difficulty with accessing good child care for their own children, poor wages and benefits and lack of recognition and ‘advancement’ in their work, resulting in stress and low morale.”

Morale is not only low, but dropping. The proportion of staff who said they believe the public respects child care providers dropped to 8.2 per cent in the 1998 *You Bet I Care* study, from 16 per cent in 1991. “Respect” came immediately behind “a better salary” in changes desired to make work more satisfying.

That same devaluing ties the hands of even the most enlightened daycare operators. Unlike school-age education, daycare in Alberta receives no stable infrastructure funding. Thus, wage increases translate directly into higher fees. “Parents can’t afford to pay the true cost of quality, just as

they couldn’t afford to pay the true cost of our education system,” says Natalie Weller, director of the Beaumont Child Care Centre and an Alberta representative to the Canadian Child Care Federation.

“It seems funny in the big picture, to think we’re a ‘have’ province and yet child care workers are underpaid, drastically, because there are not enough dollars in the system.”

Between 1980 and 1999, daycares attaining certain standards did receive provincial operating grants, spurring the growth of centres that still set the bar for excellence. But those grants (other than some management dollars for family day home agencies), were phased out by 1999. “That put a lot of us into crisis mode; it gave us no choice but to increase fees,” Weller says.

The province did offset the grant phase-out with expanded subsidies to families living on low income. But the upshot, especially for the 76 per cent of families (and even higher in rural areas) who don’t qualify for subsidies, was a spike in daycare fees, from a 60 per cent increase for infants to 39 per cent for five-year-olds.

Facing fees as high as \$600, many parents sought cheaper options: the least expensive regulated care, the untrained neighbour or relative. In fact, 70 per cent of children are in unregulated care while licensed spaces sit empty, further eating into centre budgets—and raising concerns among those who know the value of trained care.

Municipalities involved in daycare also pulled their support during the nineties, choking high-standard centres that had served as urban models and rural lifesavers. Some, such as an

attractive facility in Drumheller, have never yet reopened, despite numerous attempts.

The Red Deer Child Care Society was also caught in that double squeeze. "This organization lost a quarter of a million in funding per year," says Spencer, who was hired in 1990 to shift the society from municipal to non-profit status. Besides losing an on-site director, in-centre support staff and built-in planning time, staff saw their wages and benefits frozen for a decade. They received a slight increase this year, Spencer says, "simply because they said 'no more.' They made a powerful report to our board; they brought in their budgets, and said, 'Here are the other jobs I have to have to make ends meet.'"

As chair of CAFRA in 1999, Lana Sampson watched even the best centres struggle to meet staffing and service standards. "With the reduction of funding from the province and municipalities, the natural result is for everything to fall to the lowest common denominator," she says. "It's easy to say, 'Let it settle at its natural market level,' but we're talking about our children here."

Recognizing that fact, provinces such as Manitoba and British Columbia are instituting wage enhancements for trained staff. But Alberta daycare advocates have given up hoping that will happen here. "It's difficult to convince this government to be involved in private industry, and because many of our centres are for-profit, wage enhancements do that," says Dawne Clark, chair of the Mount Royal College department of child and youth studies. "In Alberta, we have this incredibly individualistic perspective that suggests families need to look after themselves, and that worries me. Because many families simply can't. We need to figure out where we feel our responsibility as a society lies."

Parents do hold primary responsibility for their children, and many of us would benefit from taking a sec-

ond look at our priorities through the eyes of our children. What message do they receive when we willingly shoulder hefty car payments but balk at paying a livable child care wage? When we spend less than an hour a day together in meaningful conversation or play?

Yet, given the pressures on families, and given the stakes in our collective future, *You Bet I Care* argues powerfully for a communal role in quality child care. Its authors call for a stable infusion of dollars through ongoing grants, coupled with cost-mitigating measures such as subsidized rent, utility reductions and tax incentives for work-site centres. That infusion, they say, would free up desperately needed cash for improved staff wages, "the single most critical variable predicting quality."

Appropriate training

Bowing to the reality of staff shortages, the province last fall (Oct. 31, 2000) broadened the exemptions to daycare training standards. The minister can now allow daycares that have made "every effort to fill a position with qualified staff" to hire less qualified caregivers, and regional authorities can allow a daycare to run with only minimally trained staff "when the safety of children would not be at risk."

Those exemptions represent a step back when we should be moving forward, says LaGrange. "When staffing regulations were implemented in 1990, we were very hopeful they would become more rigorous as time went on. As a baseline they were a good start, but they're really too minimal—they give you just a one in four chance of having your child in a space with someone having reasonable training."

That training is essential to quality care, notes Sherrill Brown, president of the Early Childhood Professional Association of Alberta and a Grant MacEwan College instructor. Trained caregivers have the tools to identify when a child should be talking, when

to add new materials and questions, when a family is in crisis, when to draw in other experts. "They know how to introduce the right kind of stimulation at the right time, and they understand the dynamics of what happens to a child in a group."

Sandra Griffin, executive director of the Canadian Child Care Federation, couldn't agree more. "I always figure we should reverse, and have professors working with young children while people with one or two years' experience teach university. Where we really need excellent people is in those early years," she says.

"On the one hand, I understand the exemptions; daycares can advertise across the country for months and not get a single application for a two-year graduate," muses Mount Royal's Clark. "But on the other hand, I wish they would've found money to provide a bigger qualified pool of workers. We need to support students in their further education; we have graduates who can't afford to buy a car to get to work, their student loans have so over-committed them at their salary."

Building—and keeping—the talent pool will also require salary grids that reward training, says Grant MacEwan's Hewes. "We can't get people into this program anymore; our graduates get 25 cents more per hour at the end, if they're lucky." Among those who do train, few spend any or all of their career in a typical daycare, she adds. A plethora of higher salaried, early intervention initiatives (Head Start, Early Start, Success by 6, Books for Babies, Healthy Families) is having the unfortunate side effect of sapping the cream of today's caregiver crop away from the very daycares that—given enough resources—could provide early intervention for thousands of families at risk. "There's a concern in the child care field that instead of using resources to expand it, we're siphoning off both resources and staff from the foundation of child care in this province."

“Who is responsible for child care. Is it the parent alone? Or do we share responsibility as society? I’m not willing to say the government must do this alone, but I’m convinced we can’t also say it’s just the parents. If we asked parents to pay the cost of Grade 1, they couldn’t.”

— ANNETTE LAGRANGE, *University of Calgary*

Supportive networks

“Usually, the daycare is a family’s first connection to the community in relation to their child,” notes Red Deer’s Spencer. “Our staff see these parents twice a day, and they’re sharing something very important with that family, which is that child. By the time a child is 3, that bond is so strong that problems can be identified really early.”

In the pre-cutback era, Red Deer Child Care Society caregivers had the on-site time and support to act on that knowledge. Far less so today. “Our staff can tell you what that family needs, but they no longer have time to do anything about it. Which is frustrating for them,” Spencer says.

Meanwhile, the families walking through most daycare doors present more challenges, says CAFRA Chair Judy Dubé, who directs Terra, an Edmonton service agency for pregnant and parenting teens. Poverty, fetal alcohol syndrome, allergies, mental health needs, attention deficit disorder—all have increased, especially among the families who qualify for daycare subsidies, and thus are more apt to look for licensed care.

Caring for high-risk children, watching families walk away with unmet needs, physically exhausted by lifting little people and bending over tiny furniture, staff are running on empty, says Hewes. In addition, the increasingly multicultural character of both caregivers and families injects layers of complexity and potential misunderstanding to the scene. In the daycare Diversity and Health study, she adds, “Essentially, we found that the health of child care workers is as big an issue as the health of children and families.”

Even as internal supports evaporated, crucial external links were severed in the nineties by health and social service cutbacks. In the new reality, it’s the exceptional public health nurse who can fit daycares into regular rounds; the exceptional daycare that has time to seek out the services so key to early intervention. When a government official does appear, it’s usually to regulate rather than support. “Perhaps the most critical issue facing the daycare sector is its isolation from other sectors and from community resources,” says the daycare Diversity and Health report. “The relatively invisible daycare sector has become even more isolated.”

What’s true for centres is even more real in family day homes, Hewes says, pointing to a trio of recent Canadian Child Care Federation studies on providing home-based child care for a living. “It’s a picture of pretty extreme isolation, working very long hours with very little adult companionship, in a situation where it’s difficult to provide training and supports.” Yet home-based caregivers—some licensed, most not—serve the majority of children in care.

Daycare’s isolation reflects an unfortunate dichotomy that allows “child care” (daycare, home care, after school care) and “education” (nursery and preschools) to persist as two separate silos, says University of Toronto researcher Martha Friendly. Rather than integrating the silos, Friendly writes, a chaos of other services called “child development” emerged in the nineties. Often targeted to particular groups of children and families (poor, at-risk, immigrant, rich) or particular aims (boost employment, fight poverty,

enhance literacy, prevent crime), those initiatives have taken strong root in Alberta.

While providing excellent models and useful research data, this “mish-mash” of programs fails to serve all children well, Friendly argues, thus contravening promises made when our leaders signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 and cemented Canada’s new Social Union in 1999. Certain children from certain daycares, for example, are bused to Head Start for two hours of enhanced learning when, given appropriate resources, they and all their playmates could (and in some centres, do) receive full days of equally stimulating experience from trained caregivers who are in touch with their parents twice a day.

Griffin agrees: “If we had really good early childhood education, with a lot of family and community involvement, we wouldn’t have to create specialized programs for at-risk children.”

Glimmers of hope

Even those most despairing about child care’s fragmented and fragile existence see signs of hope. Perhaps the most visible sign is a September 2000 First Ministers Communiqué on Early Childhood Development. In that agreement, signed by all but Quebec, the federal government promises to invest \$2.2-billion over five years, and the provincial and territorial governments promise to expand services in four key areas. Those areas align closely with daycare’s potential: promoting healthy pregnancy, birth and infancy; improving parenting and family supports; strengthening early childhood

development, learning and care; and strengthening community supports.

Serving children well will take more than the federal government has put into the pot (assuming that money stays in the pot—rather than disappearing, as it has after previous elections). Ken Battle and Sherri Torjman of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy estimate the work will take at least \$7.5-billion in federal funds over five years, coupled with equal provincial and territorial cash.

Quebec, meanwhile, has initiated an integrated package of children's services that's receiving close attention across the country. Excellent, affordable (\$5 per day) care serves as one cornerstone of that initiative. "People are voting with their feet," Griffin says. "It's so wildly popular that demand completely outstrips Quebec's ability to deliver."

Other provinces are also increasing their daycare investment. Manitoba, for example, now tops up wages for trained caregivers, and British Columbia is offering affordable out-of-school care. In fact, *You Bet I Care* found that total child care allocations in four provinces nearly doubled between 1992 and 1998 (in adjusted dollars). Investment in Alberta and three other provinces, meanwhile, declined.

Not that Alberta is oblivious to the need. Daycare advocates credit Iris Evans, Minister of Children's Services, for a listening ear and a desire to do the right thing.

Alberta also has models of excellent daycare on which to build—models that, like the Terra centres serving pregnant teens in Edmonton, are plugged into community resources for both parents and preschoolers. Besides trained care for their children, moms here have access to clothing exchanges, food bank assistance, medical support, parenting advice and more.

Terra director Judy Dubé cradles a toddler on her hip as we visit rooms where staff are busy diapering babies, reading books to toddlers,

serving lunch, preparing a celebratory meal for the new crop of mothers. "Because our moms see their children getting very good care, they often come to our staff when they need help, even after they've left our centre. Then we can respond, not by giving money, but by fanning out into the community," Dubé says.

"Our parenting support workers are assertive; they make things happen." Ideally, she says, all children would have access to affordable care by fully trained, justly paid staff who have ample time for both programming and family support.

But momentum in Alberta is hampered by competing priorities and ideologies. The 17 regional authorities recently formed to coordinate

children's services are still sorting out roles while fighting fires, including a ballooning number of children in protective custody. "There's so much need surrounding child welfare issues that daycare is getting swamped," observes Brown.

Attempts to strengthen daycare also bump up against expectations that families should look after themselves. Like many in the field, Hewes believes it's time to leave those arguments behind and respond to reality. "I'm tired of the fight," she says. "Just let's not have another generation of children who don't get what they need." 🐾

Cheryl Mahaffy is an Edmonton freelance writer who works with non-profit groups on quality of life initiatives.

DAYCARE NUMBERS in Alberta

(Sources: *You Bet I Care*, 1998 data, Angus Reid poll, 1999)

Alberta children, 0-5: 231,700.

Alberta children with mothers in paid labour force, 0-5: 138,000.

Regulated child care spaces: 47,033 (40,528 in centres; 6,505 in homes).

Children with working mothers in Alberta for whom a regulated space exists: 34 per cent.

Alberta's annual allocation for regulated child care: \$54.3-million.

Alberta's allocation to regulated child care for each child in the province, 0-12: \$102.02 (national average: \$206.51).

Average Alberta learning expenditure per student K-12: \$5,987.

Average amount spent in Sweden on blended child care/early childhood education: \$9,432 Canadian per child.

Median monthly parent fees for full-time care in Alberta: \$525 (infants) to \$425 (pre-school); average daily fee for three-year-old in family daycare: \$16.

Average fees for regulated care equals almost half the after-tax income of women in many clerical and service occupations.

Mean gross hourly wage for centre-based staff in Alberta: \$7.90 (assistants) to \$12.73 (directors); average after-tax income, \$13,875.

Mean gross hourly wage for centre-based staff across Canada: \$9.59 to \$18.45. Nearly one in five (18 per cent) works at another job to make ends meet.

Source of revenue for Alberta child care centres (national average in parentheses): parent fees, 53.8 per cent (49.2 per cent); fee subsidies, 36.2 per cent (30.5 per cent); all other government funding, 7.5 per cent (17.5 per cent).

Canadian economists Cleveland and Krashinsky estimate that high quality publicly funded daycare with an average 20 per cent parental contribution, scaled to income, would benefit \$2 for every \$1 spent.

Minimum training required for centre-based staff, 1998: Alberta, director, two-year diploma; 1/4 of staff, one year; all others, equivalent of 50-hour course; Quebec, 2/3 of staff in new centres require college diploma or university degree in early childhood education.

Legislated requirements for family day home providers, 1998: Alberta, none; Quebec, 45-hour training program re child development, health, diet, organization, leadership, plus first-aid certificate.

Forty per cent of women in paid work force work non-standard or irregular hours, and need flexible child care arrangements.