



## Child care cuts bad for economy: Report

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Fewer Canadian women will be able to contribute to the national economy if the federal Conservative government scraps a national child-care program set up by their Liberal predecessors, women's advocates said Monday.

A report prepared for YWCA Canada says more women will have to stay home without the increased day care spots made available under the five-year Liberal program introduced last year, which the Conservatives have promised to cancel after this year.

"We can't afford not to make this investment," study co-author Debra Mayer told a symposium on the issue at Toronto's city hall.

A difficult struggle to find day care spaces gets harder when parents — particularly shift workers — try to accommodate tight work schedules, Mayer said. Plus, finding sufficient care for children with special needs can complicate the problem, she added.

"Barrier after barrier is what our parents in Canada are faced with," Mayer said.

The \$5-billion, five-year program introduced by the former Liberal government is slated to be replaced next year with direct \$1,200 payments to parents for each child under age six.

Even with those payments, however, parents would still have day care expenses to cover, eliminating the incentives for many mothers to return to work or school, Mayer said.

YWCA Canada CEO Paulette Senior acknowledged the \$1,200 payments are beneficial to parents as a family allowance, but don't address broader day care needs.

"We believe that Canada can actually do both," Senior said.

More than two-thirds of Canadian women with a child under the age of six are in the workforce, Senior estimated. Forcing them to return home because they can't afford child care costs is an issue of equal rights, she said.

"While all family members are affected, women pay a disproportionate price when quality child care is not available."

Federal Social Development Minister Diane Finley has not wavered from the Conservative commitment to cancel the Liberal program by March 31, 2007.

Finley declined the opportunity to speak at Monday's event, but she later told CBC Newsworld that many parents are eager to see the \$1,200 payment because it gives them the freedom to choose the child care they need.

"There are a lot of parents out there who don't have access to full-time institutionalized day care, mainly because it doesn't meet their needs," Finley said.

"Now institutionalized day care is a good thing for some, but let's remember the parents who have to work night shift, the ones in rural areas, the ones that are stay-at-home parents who still need some help time to time. Our plan will help them."

Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba all signed five-year funding deals with the former Liberal government, but they allow either side to opt out with 12 months notice. Other provinces had one-year agreements in principle as they negotiated longer terms.

Opposition critics at the symposium pledged to battle the Conservatives over their child-care strategy when Parliament resumes April 3.

Liberal MP Carolyn Bennett, who is said to be mulling a run at party's upcoming federal leadership contest, said the Liberals may not have articulated the issue adequately during the last election campaign.

"It's a shame that in some ways, we didn't do a good enough job, I think, for the people of Canada, to understand really the importance ... of this extraordinarily important social infrastructure," she said.

Scrapping the Liberal program is "not a choice to the young mom who really thought that she was going back to school this September, or really thought she was going back to work," Bennett added.

New Democrat MP Olivia Chow is also spoiling for a fight.

"I can't wait until April 3 to deliver a message that . . . we need to protect these agreements," Chow said.

"We need multi-year funding, not just this coming year . . . .You can't just open a child care centre and then close them. Kids continue to be born."

Ontario Child and Youth Services Minister Mary Anne Chambers held out some hope that discussions with Finley might offer some more help for parents.

"This is not a partisan issue," Chambers said. "We actually signed an agreement as the government of Ontario with the government of Canada on behalf of parents and children in Ontario."