

LABOUR MARKET DIALOGUES: CHILD CARE

Labour Market Dialogues is a project of the Community Council designed to explore how employers in BC's Capital Region may be better supported to hire and retain people experiencing barriers to employment. This is one of nine discussion papers that share information on each barrier, with recommendations that could strengthen employers' success in recruiting and retaining staff.

Using background research on child care, interviews with three large local businesses, stories gathered from 11 parents about child care, and dialogues with child care stakeholders, the project focused on how, if at all, employers in BC's Capital Region were being affected by the child care crisis in their recruitment and retention of staff; if child care was affecting the participation of parents in the labour market; and how or if that situation could be addressed by employers.

Child care shortage

A 2007 report on child care estimated that BC's Capital Region has 5,377 fewer regulated child care spaces than parents who need them¹. Furthermore, the report noted that there is a shortage of qualified staff to work in the Region's child care centres.

Impact on employers

The limited capacity of child care services in the area are contributing to labour market stresses on employers. However, many employers in the Victoria area are not aware of child care issues and, therefore, do not plan how they will address them.

A growing number of organizations need flexible and part-time staff to accommodate extended service hours, weekend and holiday coverage. It is hard for staff with non-traditional schedules to arrange for child care, and more so if their schedules are often changing. These parents can have trouble finding care in general as most regulated providers do not offer part-time care or extended hours. These parents often must choose less reliable providers such as relatives or neighbours.

The shortage of spaces in the community for infants/toddlers (children under 30 months) affects employers when employees try to make arrangements to return to work from parental leave.

Employers struggle to accommodate parents' need for consistent, traditional work schedules to meet the hours of operation and strict pick-up and drop-off demands of child care providers. This often means that parents have to leave right at their set shift end time, which can leave another person doing the

closing duties, or that parents aren't able to work weekend shifts. These accommodations can create resentment on the part of employees without children.

Employers recognize there may not be a single business solution for child care since employees have a variety of values and needs that affect their choice of child care. For instance, a parent may not choose a large centre but rather something that reflects a more family-oriented environment or has more cultural relevance.

Employers have a diverse workforce - age, culture, sexual orientation - and all have needs and values for child care that are different.

Impact on parents

The cost of child care is a financial concern for parents, especially those working in low-wage positions and for families with more than one child. Parents may not stay in the workforce if they are not making enough to manage these costs.

Parents sometimes have to pay for a babysitter on top of their daycare fees in order to cover shifts that run past traditional day care hours. The provincial child care subsidy is only available for 20 days of work a month, and a person working 21 or 22 days a month must pay out of pocket.

Parents spend great lengths of time and effort ensuring that they are being placed on waitlists and following up on them (including losing fees paid to be put on waitlists). The uncertainty of when a spot will be found puts additional challenges on returning to work. Working parents experience great stress

dealing with child care pieced together from different sources while waiting for a spot.

There are equity issues as well. Certain groups experience child care as an even greater barrier. Recent immigrants may have traditional family sizes larger than allows for affordable child care. Female lone parents often work part-time jobs with non-traditional and shifting schedules. Parents with non-traditional work hours compete for child care spaces with parents who have traditional hours of work.

Location of child care in relation to home and work is also of concern to parents in the Capital Region, especially those who travel by bus. Parents want to choose quality child care that fits their values and work situations, but usually give up and take what they can get because child care spaces are so competitive.

Limited access to child care spaces prevents women's career progress. This may be connected to the declining birth rate.

Recommendations

Employer daycare or child care support could mean higher productivity, less absenteeism and increased staff morale, commitment and staff retention for employers. For more detail on how to increase supports for parents, see the WorkLife BC website or the bulletin from the Canadian Child Care Federation: "High Quality Child Care: Ten Emerging Workplace Support Options"².

Some potential solutions include:

- Start and end-time flexibility
- Time off, flexible hours or the ability to work from home temporarily in order to care for sick children
- Emergency care support by purchasing or prepaying for a space or spaces in an existing child care centre (can be shared between businesses)
- Employer child care subsidies
- Advanced schedule production
- On-site or near-site child care
- Alternative work arrangements, such as working from home or job-sharing
- Corporate/community partnership programs to provide short-term, flexible

summer children's programs to employed parents

- Parental networks at work for support
- Extended and flexible maternity leaves
- Increased understanding of care-related absenteeism and tardiness.

These potential solutions need to be considered in light of market impacts on child care providers. At this time, child care centres in the region do not see a market for increasing hours to accommodate workers of non-traditional hours, who are often unable to afford regulated child care given their low wages.

Child care workers are also poorly paid and place high value on family time. Employers seeking to support parents to work non-traditional shifts may consider partnerships with child care centres to pay for higher cost evening child care.

Employers can also participate at multi-sectoral tables developed to create solutions for the shortage of child care providers and quality care in the community.

When asked about recommendations, both the Chair of the Regional Child Care Council and one of its members, a director of a local child care centre, thought that developing child care spaces was difficult at this time with the current shortage of child care staff. They suggested instead that creative solutions could be looked at with the 'big picture' of child care in mind, which they are starting to address this Fall with a business plan for a unified approach to child care in the Capital Region.

¹ Joanne Cruickshank, Vincenza Gruppuso, and Stephanie Gabel (2007). *2007 Report on Child Care in the Capital Region*, Partnership in Learning & Advocacy for Young Children.

² Celia Moore (2003), http://www.cccf-fcsge.ca/practice/tenworkplaceoptions_en.htm

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