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Child care can't wait till the cows come home: Rural child care in the Canadian context

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Executive summary

“There’s no reason why children in inner cities or rural areas should not receive the same quality education or opportunities as those in suburbs or wealthy neighborhoods. If we truly believe in giving all citizens a chance to pursue happiness and pursue their goals, then we cannot continue to marginalize entire groups of people.”

— Al Sharpton, controversial US civil rights activist

Canada has been a predominantly non-rural country for almost a century. But although the rural population is now relatively small, there are nevertheless many young families among the 6.3 million Canadians living in rural areas who need and want high quality, affordable early childhood education and child care (ECEC). That many parents in rural communities—like those in towns, suburban areas and cities—need and want child care has been well documented. But in 2016, accessing regulated, affordable, high quality child care is still mostly a matter of luck for Canadian families wherever they live. For rural families, child care opportunities are even more limited. This is, in large part, linked to Canada’s marketized approach to child care. The market model—largely unplanned, primarily financed by parent fees and provided almost entirely by private non-profit and private for-profit service providers—is especially unworkable in rural, remote and northern areas.

Two main rural-specific factors contribute to rural families’ child care challenges: low population density and the prevalence of non-standard hours and seasonal work. Large geographic distances not only make it harder for parents to access child care but it is difficult for service providers to survive financially when serving populations who not only have a variety of schedule and seasonal needs but are spread out over considerable distances. As well, finding and retaining qualified staff – a pressing issue in child care across Canada generally – is significantly harder in rural, remote and northern areas due to financial pressures that keep wages low and to limited career options. These factors conspire to create an unsustainable situation for child care service providers attempting to respond to the needs of rural, remote and northern children and families. As a result, most rural communities have few options

for regulated child care. The combination of all these characteristics, coupled with rural-specific child safety issues, adds up to concerns about the lack of child care in rural communities that have persisted for 30 years.

At the present time, there is no up-to-date pulled together information that can inform parents, service providers and policy makers. The purpose of this paper, aimed at a wide range of stakeholders, is to provide a current overview of the state of rural child care and to stimulate and inform discussion aimed at improving it. It begins with current demographic data about rural family life and its challenges, then presents current information to inform and bring to light what is known about rural child care in today's Canada. This includes: a literature review of research, descriptions and analyses of rural child care to highlight issues facing contemporary rural families and child care programs. It follows this with a scan of provincial/territorial approaches and initiatives pertinent to rural child care, then presents several descriptive case studies of successful rural child care programs across the country and a brief summary of the situation of rural child care beyond our borders. It concludes with a discussion of the possibilities, then puts forward recommendations to the various levels of government and to community stakeholders.

The literature review, provincial/territorial scan and case studies conducted for this report indicate that the state of rural child care in Canada has been largely static since the topic was first considered in the 1980s. Notably, the information confirms that the same structural and funding issues and market-based approach to child care provision continue to limit the development and sustainability of rural child care. Reliance on the private market to set up and maintain child care perpetuates the lack of child care overall but especially for harder-to-serve populations such as those in rural communities. The physical, geographic and employment elements of rural communities usually make the operation of child care even less financially feasible than it is in urban and suburban communities. Limited public funding and heavy reliance on parent fees make it very difficult to develop and maintain rural child care services while keeping them affordable for families and high quality for children.

The literature identifies the reasons that rural families need and want child care: many mothers of young children are employed in rural communities; rural families desire early childhood education and socialization experiences for their children; rural parents have concerns about farm safety for their young children who may be in danger from equipment, animals or chemicals in a farm family's "workplace". At the macro level, provision of child care has been identified as a component of effective rural economic development both in North America and in the European Union.

The Canadian literature and the case studies conducted for this project identify the key factors that present barriers and those that contribute to successful operation of rural child care. In addition to the overall weak Canadian approach to ECEC, rural-specific barriers identified as affecting rural child care include: difficulties finding and retaining qualified staff; absence of suitable physical facilities together with limited capital funding; low enrollment—not due to a lack of need but to affordability; fluctuating enrollment; and the lack of base funding as a further barrier to providing ongoing affordable care. The importance of additional or more public funding and governance by an organization with enough critical mass was noted repeatedly, while leadership was identified as a key factor. That is, it takes considerable commitment from people and organizations to continually find new ways to meet the needs of their communities and keep the program operating.

The report concludes by observing that the evidence suggests that what is needed is a broad-based child care strategy that supports the flexible approaches needed to ensure that rural families have the child care options they need and want. Although the report identifies the value of specialized funding and flexibility that can play a role in initiating and sustaining rural child care services, the evidence makes it quite clear that even targeted approaches need to be sustained by the support of a systemic approach to

ECEC—a publicly-funded, publicly-managed universal system of high quality early childhood education and child care aimed at meeting the needs of all families and children. A systemic approach to planning and developing affordable, quality services and maintaining them with reliable, adequate funding would have a profound impact on the accessibility and affordability of child care for Canadians living and/or working in rural communities across Canada.

This year, the 2015 federal election renewed possibilities for Canadian child care once again. How rural child care will fare in this environment depends on whether federal/ provincial/territorial governments “get the architecture right” when developing the National Framework promised by the now-Government of Canada. As the evidence presented in this paper shows, rural families—like other Canadian families—will benefit most from a planned, publicly-financed child care system that is both evidence-based and flexible enough to meet the needs of all.

Recommendations based on the study

To the federal government

Lead in working with provinces/territories/Indigenous communities to develop a comprehensive national ECEC policy framework⁽¹⁾ based on the best evidence leading to access to high quality services for all Canadians including those living in rural communities. This will mean: Moving away from the market-based system that makes it so difficult to develop and sustain child care in rural, remote and Northern Canada;

Committing to a plan for long-term sustained federal ECEC funding, transferred to provinces/territories/Indigenous communities that agree to implement comprehensive policy frameworks and plans;

Recognizing that Indigenous communities have an immediate need for remedies to long-standing inequities, and that culturally-sensitive ELCC could play a valuable role in truth and reconciliation;

Working with provinces/territories/Indigenous communities to establish a research, data and evaluation agenda that includes the issue of child care in rural communities.

To provincial/territorial governments

Each province/territory should commit to a plan aimed at meeting rural communities’ needs for early childhood education and care. This should include: Reviewing and analyzing its approach to rural child care;

Developing ways to identify need and demand for ECEC in rural communities;

Developing a policy approach that uses the best available evidence about facilitation and maintenance of accessible, high quality ECEC services in rural communities where there is local need or demand;

Developing an approach to providing public funding that recognizes the actual cost of operating accessible high quality child care in rural communities;

Developing new approaches to ELCC workforce issues such as low wages, career opportunities and recognition that limit the possibilities for quality services in rural communities;

Providing informative materials online and in print for parents about regulated child care services in rural communities.

(1) A Shared Framework for building an early childhood education and care system for all has been put forward to national and provincial/territorial politicians by the national ECEC community.

To the union

1. Convene a national working group comprised of provincial/territorial/Indigenous community representatives and policy makers, researchers, employers and unions to examine the situation of families living and/or working in rural communities and to make recommendations for a variety of options for better ECEC and workplace support for rural families;
2. With stakeholder partners, develop research and analysis that would be useful in understanding rural child care better and to contribute to moving it forward;
3. Provide support for pilot and other special initiatives in the area of rural child care both to meet the needs of members and to provide illustrations of successful rural child care;
4. Continue to advocate with governments on the issue of access to child care generally and rural child care in particular;
5. Ensure that issues and concerns specific to Indigenous ELCC are recognized by all levels of government with the goal of developing remedies consistent with the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission;
6. Develop, support and provide resources for member parents (such as the Finding Quality Child Care website and other educational resources) to help them understand and address the issue of rural child care.

To parents in rural communities

1. Join with others such as unions, employers, social justice groups, child care advocates and other community partners to advocate for a universal national child care program to meet the needs of all families including those living and/or working in rural communities;
2. Be as well informed about your child care options as you can be, although they may be limited, so as to maximize the possibility of securing suitable, affordable, high quality child care.

To human rights specialists

1. Explore rights-based legal and other remedies to Canada's current child care situation that fails to support rural parents who need and want early childhood education and child care. This work could be supported by such documents as the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

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