

Open Letter to all Levels of Government from Working Smithers Parents without Daycare

November 29, 2021

Mayor Gladys Atrill, Town of Smithers

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Hon Nathan Cullen, Member of Legislative Assembly for Stikine

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Taylor Bachrach, Member of Parliament for Skeena-Bulkley Valley

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Dear Mayor Atrill, MLA Hon Cullen, and MP Bachrach:

We are writing to urge all three levels of government to swiftly resolve the childcare crisis in our community of Smithers, British Columbia.

We are the working parents of young children. We are your social workers, healthcare professionals, lawyers, teachers, managers, civil servants, planners, foresters, and administrative support. We depend on childcare to provide the services that this community needs.

This fall, we found out on short notice (in some cases, days' notice) that our children no longer had a placement at one of the Smithers daycare centers due to staffing shortages. As a direct result, many of us have no option but to reduce our work hours or leave our jobs, and some of us are considering leaving the community.

The Childcare Crisis in Smithers

The childcare crisis in Smithers is not new nor is it unique to Smithers. However, in recent months, it has worsened dramatically.

In February 2021, the Town created a Childcare Plan, in recognition that access to childcare is an essential service that benefits children, families, the community, and the economy. The Plan identified several shortfalls in what was then currently offered to community members, including the lack of placements for infants/toddlers under 30 months old. The Plan set out several recommendations, but there is no update as to the progress on those recommendations. Moreover, none of the recommendations address the immediate staffing issues.

The lack of placements for this age group is now at a point of crisis. Bulkley Valley Little Horizons Child Care is the only licensed group facility offering care to infants/toddlers under 30 months old. In September 2021, it was required to suspend childcare for 13 families with infants/toddlers under 30 months old, because it did not have enough licensed early childhood educators. In the past, Little Horizons has been able to obtain exemptions from the Northern Health Licensing Office, but it has not been able to this year. Little Horizons has several staff members who are partway through their ECE studies, and it was hoping that these staff members would be qualified by the end of 2021. However, this has not occurred, and over the past few weeks, many more families who were had placements with the daycare beginning in December and January were told that they no longer had a placement. It is estimated that 40 families are affected by these staffing shortages.

Reggio Kids Nature School also has a staffing shortage. This year, it suspended childcare for 8 families with children between 30 months and 5 years old.

The Gendered Impact of the Childcare Crisis

Women are still primarily responsible for childcare, both in the workforce and at home.

Our local daycares are for the most part staffed by women. Early childhood educators are trained professionals, who are entrusted with our children's health and safety. Their already demanding job has become more difficult over the past year and half, during the pandemic, when they expose themselves regularly to the illnesses of children who are too young to wear masks or be vaccinated. However, early childhood educators are still underpaid compared to other jobs with a similar level of skill and education. The provincial government's small wage enhancement program does not go far enough to address this. Systemically, women's work and specifically early childhood educator's work is undervalued.

Smithers has a staffing shortage sector-wide. However, this shortage is seen most in underpaid jobs. Early childhood educators need to be compensated fairly for their work and incentivized to stay serving our community.

We demand that the few childcare centres in Smithers receive adequate funding and support from all levels of government and that the childcare workers in our town be paid according to this wage scale, out of respect for their education and value to our community. The town, province, and country can and must invest in our childcare.

When families do not have childcare, it is well documented that for the most part, it is women who are forgoing work opportunities to stay home and take care of the children. While this is of course a labour of love, it prevents women from reaching their full potential in the workplace. It also disproportionately affects single mothers (which some of us are), who are the sole earner in the family.

Why the Local, Provincial and Federal Governments Must Take Action

All levels of government need to address the lack of childcare for Smithers families.

The Town of Smithers prides itself on being a great place to raise a family. Young families like us are growing the population and economy of our community. Without sufficient childcare, we will not be able to work and contribute to the community. We would also like to point out that our community is facing a crisis during this pandemic – our hospitals are understaffed and overwhelmed. Many of us are doctors, nurses, lab technicians, occupational and physical therapists, and without our contributions to the workplace, our entire community will suffer.

Both the Provincial and Federal Governments have committed to better access to affordable childcare and working together to reach universal \$10 per day childcare.

Unfortunately, this year, when our governments speak and campaign using the rhetoric of safe, affordable, and accessible childcare, our community has seen access to childcare decrease, rather than increase.

The Municipal, Provincial and Federal Governments must create an emergency fund with money available to incentivize early childhood educators to serve our community, as well as to

address any other supports required to ensure our children under 30 months have childcare this year when their parent's parental leave ends.

Immediate Action Needed

The **Provincial and Federal governments** must partner together to:

- financially support local Smithers childhood educators who are pursuing their early childhood education;
- incentivize qualified early childhood educators to move to and serve the Smithers community; and
- as an interim solution, provide financial support to any parents who are required to take an extended leave from work to care for their children.

Until the above efforts are achieved, the **Northern Health Licensing Office** should grant an interim exemption to Little Horizons, on any conditions necessary to ensure safety of the children, that would allow educators pursuing their early childhood education to care for our children while their studies are in progress, as was done in the past.

The **Town of Smithers** must take immediate action to:

- Advocate to Provincial and Federal governments to take the steps set out above, including incentivizing and financially supporting early childhood educators to serve our community.
- Advocate to the Northern Health Licensing Office to grant an interim exemption to Little Horizons to allow educators pursuing their early childhood education to care for our children, as was done in the past.
- Support local daycares and preschools in attracting and retaining early childhood educators - for example, by ensuring that housing is available to educators.
- Partner with local daycares and preschools to devise long-term solutions and plan for future community needs.
- Consider any other steps to address the staffing shortage.

We look forward to receiving a prompt reply to this letter out of respect to the urgent nature of this crisis. We thank you for your attention to and support for children, families, and workers in our community.

Yours Sincerely,

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