

BRIEF TO
THE HONOURABLE MARGARET BIRCH
PROVINCIAL SECRETARY FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
SUBMITTED BY
THE ONTARIO COMMITTEE ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Subject: Day Care Services for Children

We wish to express our concern regarding the proposed changes in legislation affecting day care services for children.

Even within the narrow framework of your recent statement to the Legislature, inconsistencies between objectives and proposals are evident.

1. While it is stated early in the speech that the increased participation of women in the labour force "presents us with a clear need for programs that will make day care services more generally available", the funding recommendations (i.e. to non-profit groups and agencies representing handicapped children) do little to assist most families where both parents work.

Further, the emphasis on parent and volunteer involvement and the accompanying de-emphasis of professional staff will operate to the detriment of these parents and their children. *The rationale that altering the present child-to-staff ratios will "make it possible to serve many more children" is overly simplistic since the absolute numbers of children served are more directly influenced by the size (square feet per child) and by the structure of any given facility. An immediate effect of this proposal could be a reduction in the staff complement within existing agencies.*

2. In order to provide children from low income families and native children the "opportunity to learn and grow" it is necessary to offer high quality programs. It then becomes imperative to hire qualified staff in sufficient numbers to allow meaningful contact with individual children. These children need more--not fewer-- staff than even the present legislation dictates.

3. The exclusion of consideration of the needs of the children of medium income parents who work (and who can afford to contribute towards the cost of services) supports the "welfare image" of day care, which has been so destructive in the past, and does not take into account the advantages to the children of social integration.

4. *Failure to support and encourage the development of professional standards for day care services will have the effect of maintaining the salaries of a largely female workforce at present exceedingly low levels and will result in personnel conducting programs similar*

to those being conducted by elementary teachers on the same premises with the same age group at salaries sometimes half that of the elementary teachers. The result of this unfortunate situation can only be to reduce morale and ultimately to diminish the quality of service. Certainly male involvement in this type of work would be discouraged. While there should be opportunity in the day care field for the participation of volunteers and of trained personnel from various disciplines, the need for professionals in full day services should be recognized.

At the same time we do support the Government's recognition of parental capability. In situations such as group baby-sitting co-operatives, where the children spend only limited periods of time, more casual arrangements are appropriate.

5. Notwithstanding some of the comments in your statement to the Legislature, good day care is not readily available to even middle class children, particularly children less than two years of age; and the cost represents a considerable portion of take-home pay of most women. (Centre care in Toronto costs at least \$30 per week per child, or \$1,500 per annum and up, plus transportation.)

With increasing numbers of women in the labour force, informal local arrangements become less feasible. And women who wish to take advantage of the \$500 income tax deduction often are inhibited from utilizing these casual arrangements. Of course the general reliance in Ontario on informal and haphazard methods of meeting day care needs also results in women working for minimal wages.

6. The involvement of handicapped children in a regular program could conceivably require more staff for the other children as well, since it is possible that the effects of integrating various types of children can bear on the functioning of the whole group.

Public criticism of your statement has dwelt mostly on the legislative changes which you have proposed. However, certain omissions in your speech also have serious implications for the quality and direction of services in Ontario.

....This statement has not dealt with the need for infant care.

....It has not adequately explained why government responsibility-- which begins at birth in the health area and at age four in the education area-- would be "unhealthy" in an area that directly relates to both of these.

....It does not adequately contend with the issue of universality. It states, for example, that universal kindergarten programs are necessary because they prepare children for formal schooling. Yet studies have repeatedly shown that these programs have no lasting effect on school achievement (although it can be demonstrated that parents value highly the social benefits of such programs).

....It does not promote supplementary services for sick children needing day care.

....It has not examined the needs of mothers and young children where the mother remains at home with the child.

....It has not investigated instituting shortened work hours for parents of young children. (The Government of Ontario, it should be noted, is a large employer of women.)

....It has not dealt with the criticism that minimal operational standards are maximum standards for funding.

....It has not suggested any increase in the on-going budget of this program which would indicate serious government commitment to this area of social development.

THEREFORE:

We urge the Government of Ontario to adopt and implement a truly comprehensive policy whose thrust is the expansion and enhancement of services to young children.

In fact, we urge the Government of Ontario to meet its obligation to the families and the children of this Province.

cc: The Honourable René Brunelle
Ms. Laura Sabia