

Speaking out for rural families

"Because the needs of rural Canada, especially of farm families, are considerably different from urban needs, we feel that any child care legislation should take into consideration these differences and offer a system of good quality, affordable and accessible child care for rural families."

Jennie McInnes

These words - written by Jennie McInnes, President of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada - summarize why the FWIC launched a national survey of rural child care needs. The aim of the survey was to identify these needs and ensure their consideration in future child care policy discussions.

In January, 1990, 3400 questionnaires were distributed to rural residents across Canada. The questionnaires were directed through each of the ten provincial offices of the Women's Institute. Each province received 300, with an additional 400 going to Ontario.

A cross-section of the rural population was polled. Respondents included rural families who lived on and off farms, as well as residents of small towns and villages. Families with different income levels, with one or two-parents, and who have children with special needs were also represented. Less than one-quarter of the participants of the survey were WI members.

The return rate of 51% was indicative of the deep concerns rural families have about child care issues. The responses revealed large gaps in the level of child care service available to residents in different areas of rural Canada. The survey, however, confirmed that rural child care needs are "unique" or different from the needs of urban families.

The three major concerns of the respondents about the use of child care services stemmed from conditions imposed by their rural lifestyle. First, rural residents have to travel considerable distances to reach child care facilities. Secondly, the cost of child care is prohibitive for many families who are struggling on marginal incomes. And lastly, most facilities will

not accommodate for the periodic demands and seasonal nature of rural occupations. In light of the findings of this survey, the FWIC has made the following recommendations:

A Special Policy for Rural Child Care

As the survey results indicate, specific child care issues are unique to rural families, and municipal, provincial and federal agencies must develop separate policies designed to fit the special needs of rural families.

Funding for Rural Child Care

Federal and provincial governments must examine the ways in which subsidies and allowances are allocated to child care services. In particular, FWIC recommends that:

- i) the income-earning parent be given a tax credit if the other parent stays at home to care for their children;
- ii) short-term child care costs incurred when a stay-at-home parent assists in operating a family farm be recognized as employment expenses by Revenue Canada;
- iii) and, family allowance funds that are "taxed back" from high income families be reallocated to lower income families in the form of income supplements to be used for child care only.

Innovative Approaches to Rural Child Care

To accommodate the need for seasonal child care and the problems associated with the isolation of rural families, innovative strategies must be considered. The report recommended that:

- i) Provincial governments examine the feasibility of using Farm Labour Pool offices as central registries for child care givers, especially during peak periods.
- ii) Consideration be given to portable child care facilities that could be temporarily moved to areas of high need during peak periods.
- iii) Universities and colleges with Early Childhood Education Programs consider establishing co-operative education work terms to coincide with the

peak demand for child care services in rural areas.

iv) Incentives be given to rural service groups and volunteer organizations to encourage them to set up and operate before and after school drop-in programs for children under the age of twelve.

v) Mobile toy and book lending libraries be established by municipal or provincial agencies to serve as valuable educational and information resources for isolated families in rural areas.

vi) Communities be assisted and encouraged to develop child care services to meet the needs of their own local populations.

Adaptability and Flexibility in the Provision of Rural Child Care Services

Due to the shortage of child care spaces in rural areas, existing spaces must not be lost because of the rigid adherence to overly strict regulations. Therefore, it was recommended that:

- i) As long as the health, safety and security of children is assured, communities should be permitted to make adjustments to program and facility regulations to provide child care spaces to that community; each case to be judged individually by a panel of advisors.
- ii) Rural workplace child care spaces be created in facilities such as hospitals, schools and light industries.

The Rural Child Care Survey Project report and recommendations were presented by the FWIC to Health and Welfare Canada in April, 1991.

The FWIC is committed to supporting the interests of families in rural areas. And, to this end, the FWIC ensures that the voice of rural families will be heard in future debates by governments and policymakers on child care needs in Canada.

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