

Fighting for Rural Families

WI seeking changes in rural child care policy

Stories and photo
by RON PRESTON
Staff Writer

Once again the Women's Institute is fighting to improve life in rural Canada.

The Federated Women's Institutes of Canada (FWIC) is calling for changes in rural child care policy to reflect the "unique" needs of rural families.

In a recently-released report, the FWIC makes several recommendations:

*A special policy for rural child care that recognizes issues unique to rural families.

*Federal and provincial governments must examine the ways in which subsidies and allowances are allocated to child care services.

*To address the need for seasonal child care and the problems associated with the isolation of rural families, serious consideration must be given to various innovative approaches to rural child care.

*More flexibility in the provision of rural child care services so that spaces are not lost because of rigid adherence to overly strict regulations.

Margaret Munro is the immediate past-president of the FWIC in Ontario. She and her husband now live in Ottawa and help their son on the farm.

She was a member of the committee that created and later reviewed the 3,400 questionnaires distributed across the country. (Three hundred questionnaires were sent to each province except Ontario, which received 700.)

"The goal of the survey is

that when policy is decided about child care, the input from the rural area isn't there, so people tend to look at it from a city point of view, where there are already services or services can be made available much more easily than the rural areas.

"We felt the rural areas were just as important — and in some cases, more so — and that their views should be heard when policy is made on child care."

It was important to discover what services were already available, how rural families judged those services, and what they felt was needed.

"One or two things surprised us," Munro said. "Mainly the fact that people did not expect child care to be just given to them, universal child care where it's completely funded. They expect some kind of user pay, although they did feel that single parents or people below a certain level of income — and especially those people with children with special needs — should certainly be helped."

But one of the biggest surprises was that parents said they would be prepared to stay home rather than use daycare facilities if there was some sort of financial encouragement such as tax credits for the partner working outside the home.

And women who chose to stay home to raise their children want some respect from society as well. One survey respondent wrote: "I really feel that not enough emphasis is given to women and their work. I am an RN — when I work at the hospital I am a working per-



The Federated Women's Institute of Canada recently completed a three-year study of rural day care needs. Playtime Village Daycare Centre, located between Wheatley and Leamington, is one of the few rural day-cares available across the country. The report was funded by Health and Welfare Canada.

son, and if I have a babysitter, a house cleaner and a chore boy to replace me at my duties at home, they are considered as three working people.

"But if I stay at home — care for my children, clean my home, feed family and help do

farm accounting and banking, help at barn and on tractor, cut grass, plant and tend to flower beds and garden and do volunteer work for church, 4H, and community — I am not working, I'm just at home.

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"As you can see, this has caused me much stress and by times, depression. Today's society with its increasing problems is screaming for caring women to stay home and work."

The change in the family structure has also affected farm families. No longer are grandparents living on the farm, available to watch the children while the parents work, she said.

Too often children face physical dangers when parents can't find adequate daycare. They are taken along on tractors or left to play at the end of the field near large equipment, "and a lot of them have no choice... (even though) they recognize it as not being good but they don't do it unless they really have to."

The report was completed late last year and presented to the federal government in early April but as of yet, there has been little political response from any party.

"I would hope it would generate discussion and I would certainly hope that the people making decisions on any kind of child care would take this into consideration."

Farmers have resisted outside interference but Munro said with both parents working "they are actually ready to take some kind of help."

Separate child care policies suggested

The Federated Women's Institute of Canada conducted a Rural Child Care Survey Project (1988-1991) with financial aid from Health and Welfare Canada.

It recommends that all levels of government create separate policies to deal with child care issues that are unique to rural families. (Rural includes small towns and villages.)

One of the main issues was how the federal and provincial governments allocates monies for child care services. The FWIC recommended that the working parent be given a tax credit if the other spouse stays home to take care of children; that short-term child care costs incurred when the stay-at-home parent helps on the farm is recognized as employment expense by Revenue Canada; and that family allowance funds that are "taxed back" from wealthy families be reallocated to lower income families in the form of income supplements to be used for child care only.

In addition, the report calls for innovative approaches to rural child care to address the seasonal needs and the problem of rural isolation. It recommended that:

*Provincial governments examine the feasibility of using Farm Labor Pool offices as central registries for child care givers, especially during peak periods;

*That consideration be given to portable child care facilities which could be temporarily moved to areas during peak periods;

*That universities and colleges with Early Childhood Education programs consider creating co-operative work terms to coincide with peak demand in rural areas;

*That incentives be given to rural organizations to encourage them to set up and operate before and after school drop-in programs for children under age 12;

*That mobile toy lending 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;

*And that communities be assisted and encouraged to develop child care services to meet the needs of their local populations.

The report also stressed the need for adaptability and flexibility in the provision of child care services. Since there is a shortage of child care spaces, "spaces must not be lost because of rigid adherence to overly strict regulations."

It recommended that as long as the health, safety and security of the children is assured, communities be permitted to make adjustments to program and facility regulations. Each case would be judged by advisers.

The report also called for creation of rural workplace child care spaces in hospitals, schools and light industries.