

COVID-19 FIRST PHASE RESPONSE PLAN: A FEDERAL MUNICIPAL PARTNERSHIP TO MODEL SUSTAINABLE QUALITY EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE (ELCC) SERVICES ACROSS CANADA

The Call for Action: This proposal outlines an immediate \$500 M Federal granting program to municipalities to demonstrate best practices in ELCC delivery through investments in access, workforce and service development, planning and oversight. Designed to rapidly expand childcare access, these investments will also identify the resources and measures required to create a pan Canadian system of public, sustainable, high quality early learning and childcare.

Establishing the infrastructure needed for quality ELCC services is a critical first step in developing more accessible, equitable, innovative and non-traditional models of childcare going forward. Deploying funds already promised to advance a pan Canadian ELCC system, the Federal-Municipal grant will act as a ‘down payment’, intended to kick start service expansion as it tests system changes that can be integrated into future ELCC strategies.

Why Municipalities? Recognizing that complex interjurisdiction issues may delay a fully developed pan Canadian early learning and childcare system there are concrete ways the Government of Canada, with the support of municipal partners, can take significant and decisive actions to help address some of the ELCC sector’s challenges - and support Canada’s economic recovery plan.

Already interested and involved in many aspects of their local ELCC sector, municipalities can build on their existing school and other public sector partnerships and their roles in planning, land use, and local economic development to move initiatives forward quickly. Capital projects can also take advantage of now empty public spaces that exist in many municipalities.¹

The Imperatives: The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the many systemic challenges endemic to the early learning and childcare sector and their impact on the economy and the daily lives of Canadian families.

The lack of overall capacity, shortages of qualified staff, waitlists for emergency support, and the very legitimate concerns parents have about the safety and quality of what *is* available, has resulted in women leaving or down-shifting paid work in significant numbers.² As women, particularly

Parents will no longer settle for any space they can find. Access to affordable, safe spaces, reliable high-quality programs and qualified staff will be critical as they try to decide about returning to work.

¹ Botting, Sheila. (July 10, 2020). ‘What Should We Do with 45,000 Half-Empty Public Buildings?’, *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2020/07/what-should-we-do-with-45000-half-empty-public-buildings>

² Desjardins, D., Freestone, C., Powell, N. “Pandemic Threatens Decades of Women’s Labour Force Gains”. July 30, 2020. *Economics*. RBC. Retrieved from <https://thoughtleadership.rbc.com/pandemic-threatens-decades-of-womens-labour-force-gains/>

racialized and new immigrant women, represent a disproportionate number of the frontline workforce,³ immediate efforts to meaningfully address these issues are critical to moving out of a COVID-induced recession.

Similarly, ELCC access for many of Canada's most vulnerable children has been crushed by the pandemic as changes to parents' employment or schooling makes them newly ineligible for childcare fee subsidies.⁴

It is critical that new investments help establish the kinds of robust public infrastructure across each province and territory required to implement an effective and equitable ELCC strategy. Without investing in system capacities – the workforce, its leadership, access, quality enhancement, planning, oversight and accountability -- there is a very real risk that any new federal funds will merely expand poorly equipped, poor quality programs.

Alignment: Current and Future: This proposal would complement other federal recovery strategies including the \$214 M earmarked for 14 important COVID-19 Response Plan investments. The recently announced *Rapid Housing Initiative (RHI)* models the kind of innovative Federal/Municipal partnerships that allow measurable short-term social and economic impacts while demonstrating needed system level changes.

Projects must be able to quickly respond to the urgent need for quality childcare

In addition, existing programs should be amended to permit ELCC development within federal initiatives such as the "Flexible Funding for Community Resilience" and "Temporary Wage Top-Up for Low-income Essential Workers" programs.

COVID-19 has inadvertently highlighted important opportunities for the ELCC sector. Prior to and during the pandemic many qualified Early Childhood Educators opted to leave the field and pursue more lucrative employment opportunities elsewhere. Early childhood programs offering supported employment with adequate remuneration have successfully re-engaged trained staff back into the sector.⁵

Funding Principles: It is important to ensure that any specific strategies fit within a broader framework and the following common principles should be used to consider requests for support under this funding program:

- **Transformative and Directional:** Investment streams should expand access while promoting systemic change to help build longer-term capacity in the sector.
- **Focused on Equity:** Extra emphasis should be directed to improving access to high quality early learning and childcare programs where there is evidence of community need (i.e. under-served, high risk communities, racialized groups, urban First Nations). Workforce strategies should encourage diversity in ELCC staffing and leadership.

³ Ferrer, A. & Momani, B. "The Startling Impact of COVID-19 on Immigrant Women in the Workforce". October 21, 2020. *Policy Options*. Retrieved from <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/october-2020/the-startling-impact-of-covid-19-on-immigrant-women-in-the-workforce/>

⁴ For example, as of October 2020 in Toronto only 53% of children who received a subsidy pre-pandemic were back in child care. Personal Communications. Toronto Children's Services. November 12, 2020.

⁵ Numerous evaluations indicate that public sector employers do not confront the same recruitment and retention challenges that plague the rest of the ELCC sector. See Atkinson Centre for study list.

- **Aligned and Integrated:** Strategies and investments should augment other COVID-19 response initiatives which could also involve amending the eligibility criteria in the existing Community Resilience, Investing in Infrastructure, Healthy Communities and Wages for Essential Workers programs. New investments *must* align with the well documented, longer term needs of an effective and high quality ‘system’ for early learning and childcare,
- **Independent and Additional:** Proposals must be respectful of provincial and territorial jurisdictions, but funding should be available to qualified proponents to test approaches outside of existing legislative frameworks. Investments must never be used as a replacement for previously budgeted or planned expenditures by other levels of government.
- **Responsive and Sustainable:** Capital and other projects that are ‘ready to go’ would be given priority for assessment and approval but each project would need to demonstrate how any new investments would inform longer-term federal provincial / territorial ELCC agreements.
- **Accountable and Transparent:** Impact evaluations will be established for all investment streams, with the decision-making processes and respective contributions of all partners made expressly clear. Ongoing plans to assess and improve program quality will be expected.

Who may apply? Municipalities, which include but are not limited to, regional, county, districts and amalgamated local governing bodies.

Delivery agents: To ensure efficient start up and completion of projects, municipalities may partner with public sector entities to deliver child care and related supports. These include but are not limited to local governments, school boards, post-secondary institutions, hospitals, public housing agencies, etc.

Funding requirements: 100% federal funding. Cost sharing not required but consideration is given to projects that repurpose existing local funds to complement proposals. Selected projects must support immediate service expansion and advance long term system change, measurably improve quality, and ensure greater equity of access. A cap of \$20 M per project will help ensure wider distribution and access to funding.

Time frame: Projects will be accepted to March 31, 2021 and commenced no later than March 31, 2022.

ELIGIBLE INVESTMENT STRATEGIES IN EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE INFRASTRUCTURE

Funding Stream	Target Issues and Opportunities	Investment Areas
<i>Workforce Development Employment and Human Resources</i>	Staffing issues related to recruitment, training, remuneration, quality of employment and career opportunities	<p>Recruitment incentives to support the development and retention of a diverse workforce and sector leadership</p> <p>Staff compensation improvements</p> <p>Anti-racism and Indigenous knowledge training</p> <p>Professional learning and training</p> <p>Leadership and educational bursaries (e.g. for advanced degrees, pedagogical leaders, administrators)</p>
<i>Capital and Construction Projects</i>	Readily available public spaces to expand ELCC	<p>Repurpose available publicly owned land and buildings for ELCC (e.g. schools, community centres, libraries, government agencies)</p> <p>Projects that promote physical distancing through permanent changes to space (e.g. expanding and improving outdoor learning environments)</p> <p>Combining or integrating childcare into school-based programs i.e. extending hours to accommodate parent work schedules</p> <p>Moving existing childcare centres to schools to maximize space and cost efficiencies</p> <p>Initiatives that further access to - and quality of - ELCC equipment and facilities for marginalized, racialized and First Nations communities</p>
<i>Equity and Access</i>	Public knowledge of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on specific communities	<p>Initiatives intended to expanded access for all families (universal coverage) particularly low income, marginalized, racialized and urban First Nations communities</p> <p>Demonstrating new models of accessibility and affordability, including but not limited to no fees, free hours, low fees, etc.</p> <p>Removing barriers to subsidy access, such as parental work requirements, as a condition of fee support.</p>
<i>Quality Improvement</i>	Parental concerns about quality, staff training and safety impacting return to work and economic recovery	<p>Pandemic mitigation strategies to support child and staff health and well-being</p> <p>Establish and effective use of quality review systems to promote ongoing quality improvements</p> <p>Improvements to facilities, equipment and outdoor spaces</p>



<p><i>System Planning and Development</i></p>	<p>Strengthen public sector capacities to provide evidence-informed planning and accountability</p>	<p>Inclusion of childcare in municipal planning systems to support equitable and planned development of ELCC services</p> <p>Measurement and regular reporting on access to ELCC particularly for low income, marginalized, racialized and urban First Nations communities</p> <p>Development of systems to support data collection, public reporting, childcare availability, quality ratings, etc.</p> <p>Public education campaigns on the benefits for children and parents of accessing and participating in quality ELCC</p>
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