

Forum participants unhappy with parental benefits

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During a panel presentation and public forum examining the adequacy of parental and maternity leave benefits held in St. John's Tuesday evening, Donna Squires spoke of her struggles as a self-employed, single parent.

Squires worked independently for six years, beginning when her child was 12 years old.

"Being self-employed, my income was sporadic at times; not enough to buy a can of paint ... let alone fix the roof in my house," she said.

Squires said she often found herself working early mornings and late into the night and sometimes took parttime jobs to supplement her income.

"But what would have really helped would have been knowing I had something that I could count on,"

Squires said, stressing the need to include self-employed individuals in employment insurance programs.

Though she struggled for many years, Squires said she's proud of her determination to be an effective parent. Her daughter is now doing well, and is a parent herself, she said.

The event was hosted by GEMMA - an organization that promotes infant mental health in this province and moderated by consultant Marie White.

Panel members included Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour president Lana Payne, Newfoundland Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women CEO Linda Ross and Children and Family Services consultant Melba Rabinowitz.

In giving her own parental perspective, Dr. Carol Joyce talked of the difficulty faced by professional women who choose to have both a family and a career.

Joyce and her husband are parents of a nine-year-old girl they adopted from Guatemala when the baby was eight months old.

"Adoptive mothers do not get 52 weeks (of benefits). They get 35 weeks. And that is wrong. There should be no difference between what adoptive parents get and what parents who have children by birth get," Joyce said.

According to Ross, 2006 Census Canada results indicated for the first time, couples without children outnumbered those with children. The trend is continuing, she said.

Loss of income and challenges associated with maternity and parental leave are contributing factors to why more couples opt not to have children and those who do have children are opting to have fewer, Ross said.

Substitute teacher and new mother Susan Smart told of her struggle in accumulating 600 insurable hours in order to qualify for benefits.

"We don't have regular hours. We

don't have regular days. We don't have regular salaries. So getting that time worked in added stress to my pregnancy, let alone when my child came."

Smart said when she returns to work in January she'll face another struggle to get enough hours to qualify for employment insurance benefits during the summer school break.

Payne said the labour movement is suggesting maternity and parental leave policies could be improved by reducing the number of qualifying hours from 600 to 360, eliminating the two-week waiting period and increasing the benefit rate paid from 55 per cent to 66 per cent.

Coverage should also be offered to those who at present do not qualify for benefits, including individuals who are self-employed, Payne said.

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