

Daycare dilemma: Inuit towns struggle to find operators, meet safety rules ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Daycares in four of Nunatsiavut's five communities are at risk of not opening next month, leaving Labrador's Inuit region in a tough spot.

"We are so worried for the parents - the working parents - and we're so worried for the children and we're so worried for the staff," Jenny Lyall, the Nunatsiavut government's child-care co-ordinator, told CBC's Labrador Morning.

The Nunatsiavut government receives \$990,687 a year from the federal government to run a daycare in each of its five communities.

The money is for items such as utilities, program development and nutritious snacks for the kids.

The centres are supposed to re-open on Sept. 5 after a summer break, but provincial regulations may be standing in the way.

Nain and Hopedale

Despite a local recruitment campaign, Nain and Hopedale can't find people to operate, or manage, their facilities.

Nain has 26 children registered; Hopedale, 14.

Without an operator, a daycare can't be licensed, and unlicensed daycares are allowed only four full-time spots for children - not enough to meet the need.

It's a stressful job, like anything in child care, according to Lyall. That's why, she said, there's high staff turnover and trouble recruiting. Existing workers won't fill the operator role, she said.

Postville's building is the problem

In Postville, a smaller community with the need for nine spaces, finding an operator isn't the problem.

It has one now after going without and running an unlicensed daycare from 2015 to 2017.

The problem now is the building.

In order to operate a licensed daycare, the building where they ran the unlicensed program, without issue, will need a sprinkler system, something Lyall isn't sure the municipal water system will be able to handle.

"It's a great thing to have regulations. You want a good building. You want a safe place for a child," she said. "But there's certain pieces that don't fit Nunatsiavut."

If the Nunatsiavut government can't come to some kind of agreement with the province, the plan is to rotate Postville's nine registered children through the four spaces allocated in an unlicensed facility like they have done for the last two years.

"A working parent is going to miss maybe a Tuesday afternoon or a Wednesday morning because they're not getting full-time slots," Lyall said.

"We need to have a discussion within our own government, and within the province, and look at some special considerations."

Makkovik and Rigolet

Makkovik - which needs 13 spaces - is currently without an operator, much like Nain and Hopedale but Lyall said someone is in the works.

She said under updated regulations that came into effect July 31, operators are required to be at least a Level 2 early childhood educator.

She's looking to have that waived.

Rigolet is the only community in Nunatsiavut that is able to open its daycare.

After school programs aren't in trouble - they'll run.

There's less need, so unlicensed programs, without operators, are adequate.

A proposed work around

Lyll said she applied to the province with an idea that would increase capacity at the daycares in Nain and Hopedale but her proposal was rejected.

She had suggested treating individual rooms at the daycares as separate, unlicensed facilities.

In Nain that would have meant four children in each of the facility's four rooms, totalling 16. Hopedale would have had a total of eight kids, four in each of the daycare's two rooms.

Province responds

In a statement, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development said it is aware of the situation and has had discussions with the Nunatsiavut government about possible solutions.

"These include a waiver process to allow operators to upgrade according to provincial regulation, and ideas on advertising to garner interest," it read.

"The department will continue to work with the Nunatsiavut Government throughout their search and will move quickly on approvals if interested operators come forward."

No training nearby

The new regulations released last month also require general workers to have, or be working towards, a certain level of formal education.

Existing workers can be grandfathered in, but with the closest early childhood educator program located in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Lyll is predicting more staffing problems.

She's applied for federal funding to hold modular training available in Nunatsiavut communities, but hasn't heard back yet.

"We want to build staffing capacity. We know it's important to train staff but we just need to get the funding and start working towards that," she said.

"[But] that's not going to solve Nain and Hopeville's challenge, now, for September."

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Tags: legislation and regulation ^[4]

child care ^[5]

professional development ^[6]

unlicensed ^[7]

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[2] <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/nunatsiavut-communities-without-daycare-1.4264313>

[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7851>

[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/legislation-and-regulation>

[5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-care>

[6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/professional-development>

[7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/unlicensed>