

Questions leave child care providers leery of B.C. fee reduction plan ^[1]

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Source: Vancouver Sun

Format: Article

Publication Date: 19 Mar 2018

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EXCERPTS

Many child care providers will delay opting in to the new B.C. government program to reduce daycare fees and others are opting out altogether because they have questions about the program.

The fee reduction is part of the province's new billion-dollar child care plan, announced in last month's budget.

The program will cut daycare costs by up to \$350 a month for each child, depending on the age of the child and whether they are in a licensed family or a group daycare. The money goes to the daycare, and the savings are passed on to parents.

The government said the fee reductions could start as early as April 1, but participation in the program is not mandatory and child care providers can opt in at any time, so parents may not see the discounts they're expecting in a couple of weeks. The deadline to opt in for an April 1 start is March 27.

Some organizations representing child care providers in B.C. say the deadline for the fee-reduction program is too tight and there was no real consultation with child care providers, who are confused about how their businesses will be affected.

Amanda Worms, who runs two daycares in Kelowna, is a member of and speaks for the B.C. Child Care Owners Association. She said the program was rushed and most of her association's almost 90 members — including her — plan to opt out or delay opting in because they have too many questions.

"If you're spending a billion dollars on (a plan) like this, you'd think that you would give yourself a little bit more time to consult with all the different groups," Worms said.

Rena Laberge, co-chair of the B.C. Family Child Care Association, said her organization is leaving it up to the child care providers to decide whether they plan to opt in, based on what is best for their businesses and their parents. The association's goal is to get accurate information to its members.

"Unfortunately, the information is coming out slower than we had wanted, but it doesn't mean that they're not going to opt in — it's just we haven't got all the clarification yet," Laberge said.

She said phone-in information sessions held last week — there were five in total, each drawing 100 to 300 callers — helped, but confusion returned when operating funding and fee-reduction contracts arrived in people's email inboxes on Monday. The government is expected to provide answers to a list of frequently asked questions this week.

Laberge said it's a frustrating situation for businesses and parents.

"From a parent's standpoint, it's not rolling out as fast as it should and from a child care provider point, unfortunately, it's rolling out way too fast — it's not answering our questions," Laberge said. "That's the most frustrating part because you do want to help the parents. We do realize that parent fees have risen beyond what a lot of parents can pay, but unfortunately it is our profession and it is our livelihood as well."

Sharon Gregson of the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C. said she has noticed a lot of anxiety about the program on social media, primarily from for-profit child care providers. She attributes it to the fact that the program is a big change and its implementation is taking place quickly.

"It's a period of change and people are quick to be anxious and misinformation (is) spreading, but hopefully it's just a temporary period," she said.

Gregson said there are "a lot of wins" for operators who participate in the program, including a 10-per-cent increase in their operating grant and the fact that government money will come at the beginning of the month instead of the end.

"I think it makes sense for everybody to participate," she said.

With some providers deciding to delay opting in, there will be a fee disparity for parents who, because of a shortage of spaces, won't be able to move somewhere with lower fees.

"To penalize families by not giving the fee reduction that's sitting there waiting to be offered to families, it is such a shame," Gregson said. "The vast majority, I think, of people will decide that they want to be able to pass a fee reduction on to families."

In an email, an official at the Ministry of Children and Family Development said it's too soon to say how many providers have opted in to the program or intend to.

"However, the ministry encourages providers to opt in, as the initiative provides funding to help licensed providers reduce their parent fees, which will help to keep their program competitive with other programs in their community, while also supporting the families in their programs by providing them with a break in their monthly child care costs," the official wrote.

-reprinted from Vancouver Sun

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