

Roll out of B.C. child-care plan beset with problems, operators say^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The B.C. government's billion-dollar child-care plan is rolling out this month with fee reductions at licensed centres, but some operators say a hurried process beset with problems has made for a confusing launch.

The program, which will see fee reductions of up to \$350 a month at eligible centres, is being viewed as a first step toward the governing New Democrats' election promise of universal child care. The party campaigned in last year's election on a \$10-a-day child-care system, though Premier John Horgan has acknowledged that is still a long way off.

The fee-reduction program, announced in last month's provincial budget, will provide funding of \$60 to \$350 a child, depending on the type of daycare, which the provider is then required to pass on to families. The provider also receives a 10-per-cent funding boost to support operational expenses.

But providers have complained that they weren't given enough time to opt into the system, learning in late February that they initially faced an April 1 deadline. That was later extended to April 20, but the program has begun in some areas.

Martinia Alcobia, a senior supervisor at Boat Daycare Society in Vancouver, described the fee-reduction process as "intimidating." She opted in but has yet to receive confirmation that she has been approved, making her unable to answer questions she has been receiving from parents.

"Parents are really optimistic about the whole thing, of getting a discount on their child-care fees," Ms. Alcobia said. "But on my end, I'm not sure if we're going to be approved or not. Everything is up in the air."

To opt in, providers are required to sign a contract with a number of conditions including a limit on holidays and that future fee increases must be approved by the government.

Daycare providers said the short period to apply did not give them enough time to weigh the merits of a program that could have a significant impact on their businesses.

Lucy-Ann Smith, chief executive officer of Happy Campers Child Care Ltd. on Vancouver Island, described the fee-reduction initiative as a good idea executed poorly.

"I get that this is a good idea in principle but they can't roll out something this huge and give it three weeks," said Ms. Smith, who is also waiting to hear whether she has been approved.

"I sent out an e-mail to all my clients – I wanted to keep them in the loop – but with all the uncertainties, there were a lot of questions. ... Some have been pretty frustrated and angry because they don't know what's happening either and I couldn't give them the answers they wanted to hear, because the government hasn't given us answers."

Ms. Alcobia said she received roughly 10 e-mails from the government's child-care funding program as it attempted to answer questions, and many providers reported technical difficulties submitting the online application.

Suzie Logan, who owns and operates two daycares in Coquitlam, said she was "blindsided" by the program and will not be opting in. Among her concerns is the fact that the government will consider approving fee increases based on the provider's fee history; Ms. Logan has raised fees by 3 per cent or 4 per cent every couple of years, while some larger operators have raised fees by 10 per cent to 15 per cent.

She worries about losing control of her business.

"I would love nothing more than to be able to give this discount to my families, but not at the cost of [not] knowing whether I will have this business in the next three years," Ms. Logan said. "It sucks. It makes me feel like I'm pitting myself against my families."

Mr. Horgan defended the NDP's management of the program.

"I acknowledge we are being aggressive in implementing a universal quality child-care system in British Columbia and it has been sadly lacking ... for a long period of time," Mr. Horgan said at a news conference about the initiative last week.

The Premier said the province will work with operators who have concerns, adding that the file is being handled by his team of "Katrina and Katrina" – Children and Family Development Minister Katrina Conroy and Katrina Chen, the minister of state for child care, who were at his side during the news conference.

Parent Daniel Fox said his daycare provider is also waiting to hear from the government, but that he expects to receive a \$100-a-month fee reduction for his toddler son's care, which they could put toward a savings plan for the boy, or a family vacation.

Mr. Fox said he appreciates the fee-reduction program but said he's looking forward to longer-term solutions.

"I know that the government said that this is a stopgap measure to give people some relief across the board," Mr. Fox said. "This is good and I'm glad that they're doing it, that they're jumping in and saying we'll go through long-term options but here's something to take the edge off ... but this really is just a stopgap."

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