

Alberta childcare operators struggling with minimum wage increase ^[1]

Some private operators are raising fees to afford the new \$15 hourly wage

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EXCERPTS

Some childcare operators in Alberta are struggling to afford the latest increase to the hourly minimum wage, which was raised to \$15 on Monday.

At some private daycares, operators are increasing monthly fees to compensate for the increased payroll cost.

"We have to increase their wage, and in turn, we have to increase parent fees," said Whitney Ogilvie, the director of Harvest Pointe Daycare in southeast Edmonton.

The 10-per-cent fee increase for parents represents between \$70 and \$100 per month, depending on the age of the child.

"It was a very high parent increase, unfortunately," Ogilvie said Monday.

Private daycare operators don't qualify for the provincial grants that are available for non-profits, she added.

"Budgets in childcare are tight," said Ogilvie. "You have to get creative with fundraising and cutting cost in certain areas, but ensuring that the children's needs are the first priority."

Other daycare operators are holding off on raising their fees, because they worry about losing business.

"There's a lot of daycares in our community," said Anne Sehager, who operates Anne's Kinder Kastle in Edmonton's Bonnie Doon neighbourhood.

Sehager has decided to keep her fees unchanged, but worries about offering competitive wages to her employees.

"New staff will come and be paid 15 bucks right away," Sehager said. "Of course, my older staff will want a raise."

Workers will benefit

Early childhood educators will greatly benefit from a wage increase, said Nicki Dublenko, who sits on the board of the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta.

The association has more than 1,000 members, mostly young women and newcomers to Canada, Dublenko said.

"They often are not able to make ends meet with the wages and salaries they are making as it is."

She said she also recognizes that daycare operators will struggle to adjust, and that parents are likely to pay the price.

"It for sure puts pressure on the centres to increase their fees, because there's no room to move," Dublenko said.

Wage top-ups haven't increased

Eligible daycare workers get a wage top-up from the Ministry of Children's Services as an incentive to stay in the profession. It varies from \$2.14 to \$6.02 depending on the worker's qualifications.

But the top-up wages haven't increased in decades, Ogilvie said.

"That's something that the government needs to recognize as well, since all the other costs are going up," she said.

"It's time for the government to catch up with everything else, like the cost of living."

Dublenko would like to take the conversation even further, and rethink the way childcare is funded in Alberta.

She advocates for a model where every family is entitled to childcare services no matter their income, in the same way that public schools are funded.

"Childcare is fast becoming a system in which only middle-class or high-income families can afford to purchase a childcare space."

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