

# 'It's tough': Alberta government to end 2 child-care subsidies at end of year <sup>[1]</sup>

Preschool owner says she plans to cover the subsidies until June for families enrolled at her preschool

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

Two child-care subsidies will be cut by the Alberta government in January — leaving parents and preschool operators looking for solutions.

Earlier this week, parents were notified by the province that the kin child-care subsidy, which allowed parents the ability to pay a family member to look after their child, would be discontinued at the end of the year. It covered up to \$400 a month for children not yet attending school and \$200 a month for children grades one to 6.

### 'We had a contract in place'

"People are really going to be hooped with this," said single mom Leanne Collings.

Just weeks ago, she'd been approved for the \$400 a month kin subsidy until September 2020, which allowed her to pay a relative to look after her five-year-old daughter, who was struggling in a traditional daycare setting.

"I just don't understand how they can issue approvals and then just walk away from them," she said. "Why wouldn't they have just let all of their existing approvals run out?"

Collings says even though she'd just recently qualified for the subsidy, the family member who she was paying to watch her daughter would be counting on that cash.

"We had a contract in place until September 2020. So when you start rearranging your funds and start living as if you're getting the money the government said that they were going to give you, and then they take it away, it forces you to re-evaluate everything," she said.

### \$13.4 million in new funding

Also getting the axe at the end of the year is the stay-at-home parent subsidy. It helped cover preschool costs, up to \$1,200 a year, for parents attending school, or who work part-time.

In a written statement, Lauren Armstrong with the Ministry of Children's Services said the two eliminated subsidies were used by less than 1 per cent of Alberta parents.

"Budget 2019 provides \$13.4 million (a total of \$300 million) in new funding to support the growing number of families accessing child-care subsidies," she said,

And Armstrong said in particular, kin child care had insufficient checks and balances to ensure it was in fact going toward caregivers, rather than parents.

Melanie Nickle runs Calgary preschool Roots and Wings. She said she understands that families applied, and were approved for these subsidies because they don't have the funds to pay full fees.

"But they still see the value in their children coming to preschool," she said.

### 'Preschools and families in horrible positions'

Nickle said her biggest concern with the province's cut is the timing.

"These families have applied for preschool, which runs September to June. So if you would like to discontinue this program then don't take new applications. And at the end of the year say, 'That's it,'" she said. "To cut it off mid school-year leaves both preschools and families in horrible positions."

Now, Nickle said she's made the choice to eat the cost of the promised subsidies until June for the kids who attend her preschool, because she knows their families cannot.

"As a business owner, in theory, I should then go to these families and say, 'The subsidy is discontinued, please pay me extra money,'" she said. "But, I'm going to eat that money, I'm going to take that hit."

For Nickle, that's roughly \$3,000.

"I realize to the average person doesn't seem like a lot, but that's lacrosse for my two children, right. That's two months rent," she said.

### **In a 'professionally and morally' tough spot**

For other preschools in areas of the province with more low-income families than others, Nickle says the hit could be astronomical.

"They might have 80 students and they might have anywhere from 20 to 30 to 40 students who are on subsidy. So they can't necessarily take 50 per cent of their gross earnings and throw it down the toilet," she said.

"The reality is we are not big money making businesses. We do this job because we have a passion for it, but there is not a ton of money to be had in preschool.... For those bigger programs, I don't know what they're going to do.

"Professionally and morally they know they can't go to the families, but they also know they can't run without it. When we're looking at \$30,000 or \$40,000 that could be somebody's salary, so what are we supposed to do? It puts us in a horrible moral and professional position."

Nickle said to date, as a preschool operator she has still not been directly informed by the government of the cuts. But, she says as soon as she learned, she took to Facebook to ask other operators to also find a way to cover the costs of the subsidies from January until June.

"I'm asking programs to let that money go. That's hard right? But that was my hope and my shout out is that we'll all make choices that don't impact these families, these kiddos," she said.

### **New focus for government child-care subsidies**

In her statement Armstrong said they are now "focusing child-care subsidies to assist low-income families to enter the workforce or attend school by accessing child care in settings where there is more oversight and legislated standards of care and safety."

That's something Nickle takes issue with.

"The families that I have, who are working part time, they're just trying to find a balance. And when we look at the state of child care in Alberta where we don't have enough funded spaces and appropriate child care for those working families, it's tough," she said.

And, Nickle said she's worried that the trickle-down effect of these cuts could be huge. She says preschool and other early childhood programs help kids with developmental skills and more will help them as they enter kindergarten and school beyond that.

### **'Those children...get missed out on'**

"When those children aren't in programs, they get missed out on. If you're a parent at home with one four year old you're not going to notice that they're not holding their pencil properly, or that they're struggling with certain speech sounds until they get into kindergarten," she said.

"And now what's going to happen is for schools is they're going to have more and more children coming into kindergarten who haven't had that early intervention piece. It's going to cost even more therapy time and even more intervention support to help correct that."

Armstrong said families who previously accessed these subsidies are encouraged to contact any Children's Services offices across the province for help finding a licensed or approved child care space near them.

"Current Kin Child Care providers could also connect with their local Family Day home agencies to explore the possibility of becoming an approved family day home provider," she said.

### **Related link:**

**Region:** Alberta [3]

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