

What is the future of Alberta's \$25-a-day daycare? Operators, parents waiting for answers ^[1]

Operators of some Calgary child-care centres say they're holding their breath as they wait for news about the future of Alberta's \$25-a-day pilot program.

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EXCERPTS

Kate Stenson, executive director of the Hillhurst Sunnyside Community Association, said about 95 children at its centre are part of the \$25-a-day early learning and child-care centre pilot launched by the previous NDP government in 2017.

The Hillhurst Sunnyside centre was one of 22 early learning and child-care centres supported in the first phase of the program. Funding for those operators is scheduled to run out at the end of March. Stenson said the centre hasn't yet heard about the fate of the program beyond then.

Another 100 centres were added to the program through federal funding in 2018. This second phase is scheduled to end in 2021.

"We do know that there are at least some families that will likely have to take their children out of the program, assuming that the rates do go up on April 1st," Stenson said.

"And that's really unfortunate, because I think there's a level of stability that a family can gain ... Especially if you're a single parent, having child care or not can be the difference in being able to seek employment or go to school or anything else."

In July, the UCP government sent out letters saying it would honour existing agreements.

Lauren Armstrong, press secretary to Children's Services Minister Rebecca Schulz, said the ministry is reviewing the pilot project and that "it remains unchanged from the terms, including the timeframe, established by the former government."

"We anticipate receiving the data from the second year shortly, which will inform our decisions going forward," Armstrong said in a statement. "However, we do remain concerned that the pilot did not track need, income, employment status or centre wait lists, so the utility of the data will be limited."

Rakhi Pancholi, Edmonton MLA and NDP critic for children's services, said the child-care pilot program is based on universal access.

"The idea was universal, affordable, accessible and quality child care, so it wasn't meant to be just for those low-income (families)," she said. "It's meant to be for the average family who can't afford (child care)."

Armstrong said the province increased child-care funding in the 2019 budget "to ensure that the most vulnerable children and families have access to subsidy, to help them enter the workforce or attend school."

"These families will continue to be our focus as we move forward and enter negotiations with the federal government early next year," she said.

Denise Lindsay, manager of operations for Heartland Agency and Educational Services, said the organization's programs in Calgary include its EvenStart program for children and families that come from backgrounds of risk, such as those who have experienced trauma or have developmental delays.

"Many of our families are living in poverty, and so we're the last stop for a lot of these kids who've been kicked out of other programs, including other daycare programs," Lindsay said.

"When the day care opened up under Heartland, we were able to find appropriate child-care options for these children in our agencies so that there was better continuity in services, and that allowed a lot of our families to go back to work, so that they weren't going back to work and paying that money into daycare fees."

On top of the lower rates offered under the \$25-per-day pilot program, many of these families qualified for subsidies, she added.

"So now with the disappearing of the grant potentially, that means that we will have to increase our fees, of course, to a competitive

amount within the market, so around the \$1,200 mark,” Lindsay said. “For some of our families, that means that they won’t be able to afford programming anymore. They can’t come up with the additional \$700.”

One of the agency’s two child-care centres received funding through the first phase of the provincial program.

“Our families are sitting in limbo right now,” Lindsay said. “They don’t want to quit their job if there’s potential that this program is going to continue, but they also know that they will not be able to sustain a daycare spot if the grant is discontinued.”

Lindsay said the agency sent a letter to parents last week notifying them that if the funding does come to an end, fees will be increased significantly.

Pancholi said she has spoken recently to many daycare operators that are part of the first phase of the pilot program, as they look for information and answers about the future of the program.

“They’ve got absolutely no information, so based on that, a number of them are trying to make decisions about what to do going forward and they’re having to operate off of the assumption that it’s not going to be continued,” she said.

The MLA has also been hearing from parents with children in the pilot program, as some re-evaluate whether they can continue to work.

There are also concerns at some centres that they won’t be able to retain all their staff or continue paying their staff the same wages. The pilot program included professional development and wage top-ups for staff.

Lindsay said the program grant “brought a lot of perks,” including increased funding for staff, increased training and access to various resources.

“We were just gathering momentum and we were on such a good track and the potential of that ending is really disappointing,” she said.

At Hillhurst Sunnyside daycare, the pilot program will have positive, lasting impacts, including increased daycare capacity and the participation of its childhood educators in a provincial early learning curriculum, said Stenson.

“That knowledge isn’t going to go away, and so I think we’ll continue to see positive impacts of the program, but unfortunately not on the rates for the families,” she said.

Pancholi said she has asked the government if the first 22 centres can have their funding extended for another year, when she hopes a new federal agreement can be negotiated.

“I strongly hope that (the minister) will continue to invest in affordable and accessible and quality child care, because it’s not just about affordability, it’s about quality early learning,” she said. “But it’s also about economic growth.

“It’s about getting Albertans back to work. It should be seen as part of an overall strategy to improve the economic health of the province.”

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