

Alberta child-care workers say coming budget cuts put families 'on edge'

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EXCERPTS

Child-care centres say they will have to increase fees for parents or lay off workers after learning two funding grants from the provincial government will be axed next year.

"What they've done is put all not-for-profits on edge, and families on edge," said Sue MacLean, executive director at the Oliver Centre, a licensed early childhood services program in Edmonton, Thursday.

On Monday, the ministry of children's services notified child-care centre operators that it would be eliminating the benefit contribution grant and the staff attraction incentive effective April 1.

"It feels like this government has made their decision. It's about money — it's not about people," said MacLean. The non-profit Oliver Centre might be forced to lay off staff, she said.

The benefit contribution grant is meant to offset the cost of mandatory employer payroll contributions such as Canada Pension Plan and Employment Insurance.

Accredited workers will still get wage top-ups, depending on their certification — beginning at \$2.14 per hour to a maximum of \$6.62 per hour — but the benefit contribution grant will no longer cover 16 per cent of those wage enhancements.

The staff attraction incentive is meant to help attract and keep certified staff, beginning at \$2,500 and increasing to \$5,000 over two years. No new incentive applications will be processed effective April 1.

"As a working parent with two children in child care, it is important to me that high-quality child care remains accessible," Children's Services Minister Rebecca Schulz said in a statement Thursday.

Since becoming minister, Schulz said that the grant and incentive were never mentioned in meetings with child-care representatives, but the wage top-ups were mentioned frequently.

The cuts could destabilize the already fragile child-care sector and families still reeling from the loss of other subsidies, said Nicki Dublenko, the vice-chairwoman of the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta.

"This is just another kick. A lot of our staff working in child care in this province don't even make a living wage. It's mind-boggling," said Dublenko.

The moves hit women the hardest, said NDP Opposition children's services critic Rakhi Pancholi at a news conference Thursday.

"This is continuing to be an erosion of the quality child-care system that is an economic benefit for the province, and that families really need," said Pancholi.

It could mean an extra \$20 to \$30 per month per child in costs for her family, said Leah Tolman, executive director of the City West Childcare and Community Support Society. The BCG alone covers over \$30,000 per year, or roughly two per cent of the society's overall budget, she said.

But the government's data shows that the change should result in an extra cost of \$14 per month, the minister's statement said.

For Benazir Ahmed, director of child care at the Muslim Community of Edmonton, the cuts are not insignificant, discourage working parents and immigrants from participating in the workforce.

"Every single penny matters for people living in low-income housing."

The ministry will review all child-care regulations over the next year, said Schulz.

"Low-income families will continue to be our focus as we pursue transformational change and simplify the system."

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