

Peel cancels child-care fee reduction initiative in wake of provincial cuts ^[1]

Child-care funding slashed by just over \$48.7M for 2020, advocacy group says

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EXCERPTS

Peel region officials say provincial funding cuts are forcing the closure of a program intended to make child care more affordable for families.

The region's child-care fee reduction initiative, which had been running since 2018, is ending on April 30. Olivia Nunes, acting director of early years and child-care services for Peel, told CBC News in an email that the program is ending because of "reduced child-care funding from the Government of Ontario.

"We understand how important it is for families to access affordable, quality child care," Nunes said.

"As a result, we are actively working on a revised affordability strategy to support families. When more details are available the region will communicate with parents and child-care providers."

The program's demise came as no shock to Carolyn Ferns, public policy and government relations coordinator with the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC). She said licensed child-care allocations from the province have been slashed by just over \$48.7 million for 2020, compared to 2019.

"It's going to mean that child care is going to be even less affordable. It's going to get even more expensive for families," Ferns said.

For the last two years, Peel's program had allowed families with children aged four and younger to access a \$12-a-day reduction for full-day daycare, and a \$6-a-day reduction for part-day daycare.

It was making a difference.- Carolyn Ferns, Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care

In a statement, Ministry of Education spokesperson Ingrid Anderson said the province is "committed to building childcare spaces in Peel," and is "investing \$390 million for the Ontario child care tax credit; a key component of our plan to make child care more affordable and accessible for families across Ontario.

"This tax credit will provide about 300,000 families with up to 75 per cent of their eligible child care expenses," Anderson said. "The Regional Municipality of Peel is responsible for planning, managing and coordinating child care within its community."

According to the province's 2020 child-care funding allocations, Peel region's funding was cut by just over \$4.2 million for this year.

The ministry did not respond to questions about exactly how much has been cut from child-care funding across the province this year.

Other GTA municipalities seeing cuts

According to provincial documents, Toronto's funding was slashed by just over \$5.5 million for this year, which is down from a reported \$15-million reduction that was later walked back.

"The City of Toronto is facing the same challenges for expansion plan funding from the provincial government as other municipalities," said spokesperson Natasha Hinds Fitzsimmins in a statement.

She added that this year, funding for the creation of new child care spaces will shift from 100 per cent provincial to an 80/20 split with municipalities.

Provincial figures show Halton region's funding was cut by just under \$5 million this year, while York region saw a cut of over \$1.7 million — though Monica Bryce, director of integrated children's services for the region, told CBC News that when everything is considered, that number is actually closer to \$4 million.

"It meant that we had to look at all of the programs we were funding and do our best to mitigate the impacts," she said.

York region has a similar child-care fee reduction program to what was cut in Peel, Bryce said, but they managed to keep it afloat using existing funds in the municipal budget.

"It would be great if the province would reconsider some of the direction they've indicated they'll go in regards to child care," Bryce said.

Ferns said several municipalities were running fee-reduction and affordability pilot projects like Peel's, including Cornwall, the County of Middlesex, Waterloo, and the United Counties of Prescott and Russell. All of those programs ended in either 2018 or 2019.

Hamilton's program was extended until June of this year, but is contingent on funding from higher levels of government, Ferns said. Windsor is in a similar boat.

"They're kind of running on borrowed time," Ferns said.

'It was making a difference'

People in Ontario pay some of the the highest child-care fees in the country. According to a 2019 report [3] from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), the cost of infant care in Toronto is nearly 10 times that of Montreal, where Quebec's universal child-care program has been in place since 1997.

The median monthly cost in Toronto was \$1,675 vs. \$175 in Montreal, making the two cities the most and least expensive in Canada, respectively.

"It's really unaffordable already, and that's why municipalities had started exploring the idea of fee-reduction pilot programs," Ferns said.

"It was making a difference."

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