

Canada's medical workers scramble to find child care amid COVID-19 outbreak^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Parents across the country are rushing to secure last-minute child-care options as some provinces cancel school, in some cases indefinitely, and shut down daycare centres as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The problem is especially acute for health-care workers and first responders, as provinces work to bolster their resources ahead of an expected wave of serious cases. B.C. officials cited the need to ensure health-care workers are available as a reason for not shutting down schools and daycares, while Quebec said it will provide emergency child-care services to essential workers, such as health-care staff.

Elsewhere, like Alberta, where parents were given just 12 hours' notice before schools and daycares closed on Monday morning, parents have been left to their own devices. Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario have also announced school closings.

The STEM Montessori Academy of Canada, a not-for-profit organization, is offering camp programming it says is "emergency childcare" at more than a dozen Royal Canadian Legion branches and Lions Club locations across Ontario during the school-closing period, from March 23 to April 5.

"We're looking at our health-care providers, our police officers, our firefighters and the people who work at grocery stores who have to be there to work," says Vonnie Robinson, one of the program's co-ordinators.

"This is for parents to be able to have somewhere safe to provide child care for their children during this time," she says.

Children in the program will have their temperatures taken upon arrival, again at lunch and once more when they leave, Ms. Robinson says.

The program will practise social distancing. There will be sanitation stations at every table, and cleaners will sanitize the space every hour.

Medical students across Canada are reaching out to local health-care professionals such as doctors and nurses who may need support with everything from child care to grocery runs.

Tingting Yan, a medical student at the University of Toronto, is among those volunteering. So far, more than 170 medical and nursing students at U of T have volunteered, and more than 90 health-care providers across the Greater Toronto Area have put in requests for help.

"The biggest ask is for child care so far," Ms. Yan said. "Even if we're not able to directly care for patients ... we still wanted to make a difference."

Alberta's Education Minister, Adriana LaGrange, said she understands the class cancellations and daycare closings in her province will be difficult for parents with young children, but she said the public-health risk demanded "unprecedented" action. The government has not provided any advice or assistance to parents affected by the school closings, but Ms. LaGrange said the province is working on helping Albertans affected by the pandemic.

"The need to ensure public safety is paramount," Ms. LaGrange said. "I would just ask all parents and all caregivers to really work with us for the betterment of society and to be good neighbours, as well as good citizens."

Pam Roach is working from her home in Calgary while trying to keep her two children occupied. Caitlin, her eight-year-old daughter, is trying to teach her six-year-old brother Declan in a makeshift classroom in the basement.

"Luckily our eight-year-old is what, I think when we were kids, would have been called bossy. But I prefer to call her a good leader," Ms. Roach said.

The kids are in French immersion at Calgary's St. Luke School.

The children's maternal grandmother's first language is French, so they are chatting with her on Skype to stay sharp. The first day of homeschooling went well, with reading, math, recess and Disney+ while Ms. Roach was on a meeting on the phone. But families are in for

the long haul.

"I think maybe the kids are realizing that this isn't just a long weekend," Ms. Roach said.

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