

Health Department urges daycares to close ^[1]

Certain facilities will stay open for children of essential workers

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EXCERPTS

Chief Medical Officer Jennifer Russell recommends all daycares close, excluding a few centres that have been identified to serve children of essential workers.

"The time is now for all to act to limit the spread of this virus, particularly to our most vulnerable residents," she said.

All public schools were closed in New Brunswick for two weeks starting Monday because of the coronavirus outbreak — but the government excluded any recommendations for daycares until now.

Daycares were on a list of organizations and businesses advised to shut down. Others includes theatres, bars, museums, buffet restaurants.

Premier Blaine Higgs said if any facility chooses to ignore these recommendation, which are effective tomorrow, then it would be a "real disservice" to the public good.

There are currently five presumptive and two confirmed cases of COVID-19 in New Brunswick.

The first was announced Wednesday — a woman in her 50s or 60s who had just returned from France.

Four cases were announced Sunday and were all linked to the first. These five were in close contact, but the first is in the southeastern part of the province, and the newest are in central New Brunswick.

The latest presumptive case was announced Monday and is a woman between 20 and 30 in the southern part of the province who has recently travelled to Greece.

Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island have both closed daycares and schools.

'Response plan'

Higgs said there is a "response plan" in place to make sure there are child-care options for essential workers like doctors, nurses and support staff. He said people who are deemed essential can call 1-833-221-9339 for information.

Daycare centres operating to support essential workers are to follow strict health and safety directives, and guidelines such as reducing group sizes and maintaining social distancing.

Higgs said he doesn't believe parents will be "punished financially" because of the daycare recommendation.

"In the case of someone who's now forced to stay home. ... We're looking at how do we mitigate that?"

He said the federal government said there will be money to help parents but he doesn't have any details on that yet.

"We are pressuring for clarity on this financial package," he said.

Child-care closed

At least one daycare facility took Dr. Russell's recommendation as an explicit order.

The Fredericton YMCA sent an email to parents Monday evening.

"As was announced today by Premier Higgs and Dr. Russell, all early learning and childcare facilities have been ordered to be closed beginning Tuesday," the email said.

The YMCA of Greater Saint John announced Monday it will be closing all facilities, including its childcare and after-school programs. In a news release, it said it's doing so "in compliance with recommendations by the Province of New Brunswick's Minister of Health to aggressively manage physical distancing in public places to prevent community spread."

Both Fredericton and Saint John YMCAs said they will not take any payment for programs or services until facilities reopen.

The Sussex Early Learning Centre also closed its doors, "until further notice," according to a social media post.

"We hope these actions will assist in flattening the curve of the virus and curbing its spread," the post reads.

Financial hardship

Jean Robinson with the daycare group Early Childhood Care and Education of New Brunswick said this is "welcome news" for many daycare owners, who wanted this recommendation since school closures were announced Friday.

"[Early Childhood Educators] and owner operators were seething angry," she said. "Because they want their own self, their own staff and their own families to be safe."

But now that the recommendation was made, she said one major question remains unanswered - what about the livelihood of daycare owners and staff?

"For the people who are frantically worried about if they'll lose their business, lose their livelihood if they have to close down ... I'm sure it's very stressful."

Higgs did not say if there will be any penalties if a daycare remains open, but that it would be against best judgment and social responsibility.

Continuing to pay?

Robinson said typically, if there's an unexpected closure, operators will continue to charge parents for their children's care. She said this is what owners do if there's a power outage or a snowstorm.

"Parents have signed a contract that they know whether they use the space or not they still pay for that space," she said. "They're not paying for their child to come. They're paying for their child to have that space."

Marissa Hutchins has a two-and-a-half-year old and a three-week old. She's been home on maternity leave, and Monday was the first day she didn't send her daughter to daycare. The daycare is located inside a school and it was not clear to her if her daughter was allowed to be there.

She said she was disappointed to see that she still paid the \$40 daycare fee, and wonders how much longer she'll have to pay for daycare while her daughter stays home.

"For this closure and for how long it might go on for, it's super stressful ... to have to pay it," she said. "I'm already on a restricted income."

She's hoping for a reimbursement program from the government to take the \$120-per-week burden off her shoulders - but she also understands daycares are businesses.

"I'm sure those people need paycheques too," she said.

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