

B.C. physicians concerned over lack of childcare options amid COVID-19 emergency ^[1]

Health-care staff mobilizing online to find solutions as schools ordered to close

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EXCERPTS

Health-care workers in B.C. say they're extremely concerned about a lack of child-care solutions for their families in the face of school closures.

Victoria family physician Sarah Lea says many doctors and nurses have been working irregular and overtime hours on the frontlines of the COVID-19 outbreak, providing essential services to patients. Couples who are both physicians particularly struggle to find care for their young children when they're called in to work, she said.

Now, communities in B.C. are mobilizing online to help each other find child-care solutions.

"It really highlights the lack of formalized child care in Canada," said Lea, who has three young children, all under the age of seven. She ended up "scrambling" when her nanny quit as the COVID-19 outbreak ramped up in Canada.

Premier John Horgan announced Tuesday that all kindergarten to Grade 12 schools will remain closed at the end of spring break for an indefinite period of time due to the pandemic.

Elsewhere, Alberta announced Sunday that it was cancelling all K-12 classes, as well as licensed child care. In Quebec, health-care workers now have access to free emergency daycare for their kids.

Joanna Cheek, a psychiatrist in Victoria, has been hard at work developing a mental health pandemic response for the healthcare system to help both patients and physicians.

She said that while daycares in B.C. haven't yet closed, she's refusing to bring her two children, aged five and six, to daycare because the health risks are too high.

Lea explained that she and her husband, also a physician, need to find flexible childcare options as soon as they can. As independent contractors, they don't have a union that can defend their needs as providers of essential services.

"It's going to be scary, as a physician, inviting someone unknown into your home during this outbreak," said Lea, adding that she's spoken with a couple of medical students who might be willing to look after her children.

A statement from the B.C. Ministry of Health says it is "considering what options are available to support continued access to child-care services."

"We know how important it is for [health-care workers] to have access to child care, especially at this time," it said.

Communities find solutions online

Meanwhile, communities have come together online to support each other.

Karmen McNamara, a Victoria resident who manages a staff of home care workers, says health-care workers are "our No. 1 line of defence right now, and they are the ones putting themselves at risk, day in and day out, in order to try to save our community."

On Monday, she created an online sign-up system for those willing to offer child care to health workers in Greater Victoria, and said about a dozen had signed up so far.

"Anything we can do to provide support is much needed," she said.

Cheek, who has been organizing alternative solutions by connecting with physicians, said a couple hundred health workers on the South Island are collaborating in a Facebook group. From that, a number of fourth-year medical students at the University of Victoria have offered their support — an option she's OK with, given they understand the gravity of the pandemic.

"It's really great," she said. "But they're only helping doctors. There are still nurses ... and other physicians that need help."

Cheek said as a last resort, physicians would take turns watching over each other's children.

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