

Some licensed child-care centres won't survive COVID-19 closures, industry warns ^[1]

Ontario says 'solution for parents' coming, no further details provided

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EXCERPTED

Ontario stands to lose many of its licensed child-care centres due to a lack of funding during the COVID-19 crisis, operators and industry advocates are warning.

Most of the centres have been closed since March 14, when the province and various municipalities introduced stricter measures to enforce physical distancing.

"Without a doubt, there will be centres who simply can't survive and won't be there for the parents they're currently serving," said Erin Filby of the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO).

Since the widespread closures beginning the week of March Break, child-care centres have rolled out a patchwork of policies. Some have waived parent fees while others have continued charging them despite being closed, according to Filby and other operators.

AECEO and the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care are now asking Ontario to cover the full parent fees during the closure period, similar to a recent funding announcement made by Newfoundland and Labrador.

Operators 'scrambling'

"Many child-care operators were kind of scrambling because we weren't being given clear and adequate information," said Amy O'Neil, director of Treetop Children's Centre in Toronto.

Treetop suspended parent fees immediately and is now tapping into its reserve funds to continue paying its staff, rent and utilities, though O'Neil worries the setup will not be sustainable in the event of a prolonged closure.

She said parent fees account for more than 80 per cent of her centre's revenue.

"Without any relief from the government, and funding, what are we going to do? Are we even going to be able to open our doors when this is all over?" O'Neil said.

Filby said the permanent closure of existing child-care facilities would create numerous cascading effects, including a greater reliance on unlicensed child care. She also expects some parents will not be able to return to work if their existing spot vanishes due to the lack of available spaces in the GTA.

"Frankly, it will drive women out of work," Filby said.

In an email, a spokesperson for Ontario's Ministry of Education said it will be "bringing forward a solution to support parents" but did not provide any further details.

Premier Doug Ford previously addressed reports of centres that were still charging parents fees on Friday, March 27.

"They shouldn't be charged. That's not fair if they aren't taking care of your children," he told reporters. "If you're a daycare owner, don't take advantage of people."

'Completely unreasonable'

Kidz Kare, a non-profit child-care centre in downtown Toronto, is among those that continued charging full parent fees after the mandatory closure, though it will cease doing so beginning April 6.

"I thought it was completely unfair, completely unreasonable. They are not providing the service which we paid for," said Patricia Stoutley, who pays approximately \$2,500 monthly for her two children enrolled at the centre.

Stoutley, who is relying on employment insurance benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic, suspended her payments and now fears that

her children will not have a space at Kidz Kare when it reopens.

"I'm extremely worried. I hope that we still have a spot there," she said.

Ben Michoux, who has a four-year-old son at Kidz Kare, said he'd be willing to pay a lowered fee if additional government funding makes up the difference.

"If the government can subsidize that, I personally think we could be paying some small amount to make sure the daycare is obviously not going bankrupt," he said.

In a letter to parents, the centre said the continued collection of fees was "crucial to keep the Kidz Kare family alive and be able to reopen when able to do so."

The centre backed off that plan on Monday after the federal government announced it would cover 75 per cent of employee wages at small businesses and non-profit organizations. Kidz Kare will now allow parents to stop paying fees. It is also offering an online program for \$100 per week.

"This has been a tremendously difficult situation for everyone and we have been doing our best to communicate with our Kidz Kare network as much as possible with the often limited amount of information we have," said operations manager Lisa Swan in an email to CBC Toronto.

Clear direction, more consistency

The fluctuating policies at centres like Kidz Kare represent a secondary problem identified by industry workers: a lack of direction from the province about what to do during the crisis.

Filby said child-care centres have essentially been left to operate in "silos," meaning there is little consistency across the sector when it comes to fees and how to keep paying staff and other operating costs.

She said those decisions should not be left to individual child-care centres.

"They don't have the capability to make these kinds of massive public-policy decisions," Filby said.

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