

Child-care federation calls on provinces to take unified approach during outbreak ^[1]

Parents shouldn't have to pay for services they're not using, group says

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Source: CBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 26 Mar 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTED

The Canadian Child Care Federation is calling on the federal government to take the lead and develop a uniform approach to child care in the face of COVID-19.

CEO Don Giesbrecht said the "scattershot" response by provinces means that parents are getting "unclear and varied" information depending on where they live.

"It has left Canada's [daycare] sector confused, anxious and wondering why one approach to the COVID-19 exists in one province, but is not the same as another," said Giesbrecht.

In an open letter released on Wednesday, Giesbrecht called on federal and provincial ministers to ensure that all parents are treated the same.

He said provinces should all respond the same way to recent concerns, including which daycares should stay open for essential workers, how to pay child-care staff, and how to fund closed facilities so that they're viable and ready to go when everyone goes back to work.

"Many child-care programs and providers across Canada have either laid off their employees, are considering doing so, or have shut their programs down. ... Those programs and providers still operating and/or paying expenses can only manage to do so for a finite amount of time."

On March 13 in New Brunswick, the government announced that schools would close, but deemed daycares and early learning centres essential for working parents.

Three days later, the chief medical officer of health urged daycares to close. Three days after that, they were among the many businesses and operations forced to shut down when the province declared a state of emergency.

Only child-care operations serving children of essential workers can stay open.

Stories soon began to emerge about now-closed facilities continuing to charge families in order to hold spaces.

On March 18, Education and Early Childhood Development Minister Dominic Cardy said daycares that have laid off their staff can no longer charge parents. But daycares that still have staff can continue to ask for payment, even if they're closed.

In neighbouring Nova Scotia, licensed daycare operators are still receiving grants and subsidies, early childhood educators are still getting paid, and parents with children in licensed centres aren't paying fees or losing spaces.

Giesbrecht said New Brunswick's situation is not unique — proof that a unified approach is needed in a global pandemic.

For starters, he said daycare workers should continue to get paid if they get sent home, and that parents — whether laid off or not — shouldn't have to pay for services they're not using. Furthermore, essential workers shouldn't have to pay for child care at all.

"Families are going to need every dollar coming in just to put their own food on the table, pay their mortgage and utilities, etc.," said Giesbrecht. "So let's not place an extra burden on families who are already stressing enough."

Giesbrecht said the industry often talks about "paying for the space, not the time" and many parents are being asked to continue to pay in order to save their space.

But these are not the times to be taking that approach, said Giesbrecht.

He said daycare operators shouldn't be "asking anything from any family for a service they're not receiving right now."

The national group says its members include people providing child-care services, academics, researchers, parents and policy-makers.

Cardy has said child-care operators that are staying open to care for children of essential workers can still charge regular fees to their current families who are not using the service right now. If those families have lost income because of COVID-19, the government will cover those fees.

In a memo sent to daycare providers, Cardy said essential workers using those daycares will only be asked to pay one fee — not one for their old daycare and one for their new one.

The memo said if a daycare continues to charge parents even after laying off staff, it will "be subject to further measures by the department."

The memo also said all the facilities that closed will still receive grants and subsidies.

The memo points to the federal government's announcement of \$27 billion to Canadian workers and businesses. That plan introduces \$2 billion addition to the Child Tax Benefit.

It also introduces funding of up to \$900 every two weeks for up to 15 weeks "to provide income support to workers who must stay home and do not have access to paid sick leave," but don't qualify for EI, or for parents who do qualify for EI but had to care for sick children.

That plan also includes a 10 per cent wage subsidy for the next 90 days for small businesses, up to a maximum of \$1,375 per employee and \$25,000 per employer.

But Giesbrecht would like to see a special fund set up to specifically ensure the survival of daycares. Without it, he worries that there won't be enough facilities still in business when workers return to the job post-COVID-19.

Giesbrecht said parent fees represent anywhere from 50 to 80 per cent of the operating revenue of a daycare.

"That is their absolute lifeline. Without that, they will close their doors. No two ways about that."

And if daycares aren't there to look after children when their parents return to work, "we will not recover as a nation without that service being available," said Giesbrecht.

In response to questions asked on Thursday, spokesperson Danielle Elliott said the provincial department is working "to ensure that emergency early learning and child care is available to essential workers as the situation progresses."

She said parents whose work is essential should visit the website of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for information.

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