Sask. school daycares remain open for children of health care, essential service workers [1]

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EXCERPTS

Bridget Fleming has always faced challenges finding childcare.

Fleming, a paramedic who works a 24-hour on-call shift out of Yorkton, was only able to return to work after the birth of her son Kason six years ago because her mother-in-law moved from Ontario to watch him.

The COVID-19 pandemic has complicated that situation. Fleming's husband Mike, also a paramedic, is self-isolating in the family basement after showing symptoms of the virus. Leaving Kason with his grandmother is no longer an option.

"She's 70 years old, she's in that age group that this is going to hit the hardest and the most severely," Fleming said. "Obviously in our profession we take that very seriously and, as a family, that's our No. 1 priority, to keep our family safe."

While Saskatchewan schools and school-based childcare facilities were closed to the general public on Friday, the province announced that school-based childcare facilities will remain open to provide childcare for health care and other essential services workers.

The centres will be open Monday. Licensed, non-school-based daycare centres remain open, but cannot have more than eight children unless configured so that a maximum of eight children are kept in one room.

Ministry of Education spokesman Chris Hodges said in an email that school-based facilities are providing the service because they want to, not because they have been mandated to.

"While child care centre operating funding is comprised of both parent fees and government grants, we are committed to minimizing the financial impact on these centres," Hodges said.

Centres representing more than 2,300 spaces have already volunteered, he added.

Saskatchewan NDP Leader Ryan Meili said at a Friday news conference that he was "deeply disappointed" by the decision. He wants suspension of all childcare facilities and development of an alternative, home-based model.

Having the children of health care workers gathered together runs the risk of them spreading the virus to each other and then bringing it home, Meili said.

"You're really creating a model for the spread of COVID-19 through the families of health care workers," he said. "Which is exactly the group we know will be more exposed, but we want to protect them as much as possible."

Meili proposed a model where those who are not working could be screened and trained to go into homes to watch children.

Health workers have already been looking at that.

Kelly Prime, president of the Paramedic Services Chiefs of Saskatchewan, said the idea of bringing in older children of staff to watch younger ones has been discussed.

"It's a juggling act. Either you're dedicated to your work and you have somebody come in and look after your kids on a full-time basis, or you have to look after your kids and now you can't work," he said.

Saskatchewan Health Authority staff who spoke with The StarPhoenix this week said a similar concept was floated in some meetings. The Saskatchewan Medical Association says medical students have offered to provide some additional child care support for physicians.

A full list of people eligible for the childcare, an application for the centres and more information is available on the province's coronavirus website.
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