

In-home child-care providers face tough decisions despite government aid ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In-home child-care providers feel bypassed by the provincial government's compensation plans, some of whom face a total loss of income.

While larger group child-care facilities that stay open can access \$20,000 a month or more to get them through the COVID-19 crisis, smaller operators say they could see as little as a few hundred dollars.

Care providers face months of financial uncertainty, if they choose to accept the government aid package, said Rena Laberge, chair of the B.C. Family Child Care Association.

"If they take the emergency funding, they are not allowed to charge parents they currently have enrolled if they choose not bring their children to the child care," she said. "And they have to guarantee those spaces will still be there when the pandemic is over, and no one can say when that will be."

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the provincial government announced that licensed centres could receive seven times their normal subsidy if they stay open.

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In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the provincial government announced that licensed centres could receive seven times their normal subsidy if they stay open.

"I stand to qualify for \$2,400 a month if I stay open and only \$700 if I close," said Stephanie Pankratz, who operates a multi-age care centre. "When I have to make tough decisions regarding my business, and require parents to pay part of their fees, they get mad because their perception is that the government is funding us."

The aid package only applies to centres that already receive Child Care Operating Funding and requires that providers do not charge parents for spaces if they temporarily withdraw and that they reserve those spaces for children who return after the crisis.

The compensation being offered to Pankratz for continuing to provide service is about half what parents pay in fees and about one-third of her actual expenses, and much less if she closes due to the pandemic.

Early childhood educators are feeling disrespected by the way aid is being offered, said Brittany Nuber of Busy B's Daycare.

"We are being called essential workers yet there has been no added protection for us and our health," she said. "Our wages are not nearly comparable with other essential workers' wages."

"Most daycares can't even pay half of their bills with the seven-times funding promised if they stay open and risk their health."

Despite the government's efforts, small- and medium-sized operators are struggling with the cost of rent, food and wages for staff, said licensed provider Brittany Gagne.

"Some of us are losing everything, in some cases we are shutting our doors that may never open again," she said.

The diversity of the child-care sector — ranging from informal arrangements in suburban basements to large institutions — makes it difficult to provide clear direction to providers, said affordable child-care advocate Sharon Gregson.

A better approach would be to close child-care programs and guarantee that educators and providers still get paid, then focus on providing care for the children of essential workers, she said.

“Parents are afraid, early childhood educators are afraid, and operators don’t know if there is a liability issue if they stay open and someone gets sick,” she said. “In many cases, you are bringing children into your home with your own children.”

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