

Daycare spaces reopen for children of Alberta's essential workers^[1]

Eligibility, restrictions will fluctuate on recommendations from province's top doctor

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EXCERPTS

Select daycare centres across Alberta are preparing to reopen their doors to thousands of children of essential workers.

Over the weekend, the Ministry of Children's Services reached out to child-care operators across the province to ask if they would be willing to reopen under strict rules.

It's part of the province's efforts to ease the burden on medical staff, first responders and utility providers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

So far, 192 centres across the Alberta have agreed and more than 4,400 spaces are available, most starting next week. Initially, the ministry estimated 6,000 spaces would be accessible as early as this week. The goal is to eventually increase that number to 15,000.

The government confirmed spots will be popping up in Edmonton, Calgary, Devon, Fort McMurray, Fort Saskatchewan, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Red Deer and Stony Plain. Facilities were picked for their proximity to hospitals and other health services.

It's not open season on those scarce spaces. Employers who qualify are co-ordinating directly with the province to contact eligible employees and offer spots to them. The subsidies parents were eligible for prior to the pandemic will be applied, and rates should generally remain the same.

"I think everybody knows that this pandemic is something that is incredibly serious," Children's Services Minister Rebecca Schulz said.

"Just as everything is changing rapidly day by day, at any point we know that we may need to change those parameters."

The ministry declined to provide a full list of the businesses because they don't want non-eligible parents to inundate them with requests.

"I would also ask that, if you're a parent who is afforded a child-care space, that you only use it if you have no other way to ensure that you can get to your critical job," Premier Jason Kenney said when the project was announced last week.

Strict rules for staff, parents

Centres will be limited to 30 people — staff and children combined — and there will be limited contact during drop-off and pickup to minimize the possibility of COVID-19 transmission. Temperature checks will be conducted on the kids, and anyone showing symptoms won't be admitted.

There are also rigorous new sanitation procedures that staff must follow. The province is helping centres acquire proper cleaning equipment. It will also provide financial support to the facilities for any reopened spaces that are not filled.

All of this could change at any time. The minister said the rules will fluctuate based on updates from Alberta's top doctor, Deena Hinshaw. Spaces could be added or taken away, protocols could be tightened and the definition of an essential worker could be broadened. It's all up to Hinshaw.

Any daycare centres that were not contacted by the department must remain closed.

Carolyn Yake knew she'd be getting a call. Her daycare, Little Learners, is only three kilometres away from the University of Alberta Hospital.

"We had already discussed with my staff because we knew we might be approached, and my staff had agreed that they wanted to support the community and the essential workers, and they wanted to work," she told CBC News.

But accompanying that willingness is concern.

There are daily conversations between staff members about "just how nervous they really are," Yake admitted.

Her centre has been cleared for 25 children.

"We're putting ourselves at risk with children who don't fully understand handwashing and self-isolating."

'We are also essential workers'

Other daycare centres in the province have refused the offer to reopen.

"There are a number of things that go into that decision, and I truly do respect the decision made by those centres," Schulz said.

Earlier this month, a two-year-old child at a large Calgary daycare tested positive for COVID-19. Daycares and schools have been closed since March 15.

On Wednesday afternoon, the premier announced 61 new confirmed cases in Alberta, boosting the total to 419.

As the number of infections grows, so does the apprehension among Little Learners staff as they prepare for reopening on Monday.

"We are also essential workers," Yake said.

"We are also putting ourselves at risk, and so when we go home every single day after working in the centres, we have to be careful we're not spreading anything to our families."

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