

'My job is giving hugs': Daycare concerns include safety, funding, future ^[1]

Government of Sask. will provide grants to all daycares, open and closed, with additional money in works

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EXCERPTS

Giving about a hundred hugs a day is normal for daycare worker Gloria Harris, and she usually loves it.

But in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, every hug, diaper change and wiped nose strikes fear in Harris, who has a daughter with a compromised immune system at home.

"It's really hard to social distance yourself from children ... my job is giving hugs, and comfort, and if they get hurt, you have to pick them up and cuddle them," Harris said.

Harris said bringing the virus home could be deadly for her six-year-old daughter, Gracie. So she made the difficult decision to ask her boss — who she said was "great" — for a layoff.

"It's going to be really tough financially, but money is just an object and my daughter's health is more important," Harris said.

The daycare where Harris works, Children's Choice in Prince Albert, will have to consider laying off other workers due to dwindling enrolment and revenue, according to its executive director.

It provides child care to children of essential service workers, including nurses, doctors, lab techs, police and mental health workers, among others.

A single sneeze stops everything

While some provinces, such as Alberta and Ontario, have shut down daycares that aren't serving essential service workers, Saskatchewan is allowing all licensed daycares to continue to operate as long as they maintain a maximum of eight children per room.

Daycare workers, operators and parents have voiced a range of concerns, including sanitation levels, funding security, staff layoffs, parent fees and the future of centres and child-care spaces.

At Children's Choice, workers are being asked to enforce strict sanitation measures, including hand washing, sanitizing toys and surfaces, as well as taking the temperatures of children. A single sneeze from a child forces everyone to stop and wipe down the area, or toss out food at mealtime.

Even with those measures, executive director Gail Szautner said maintaining any physical distance with toddlers is impossible.

Dwindling enrolment, layoffs

The non-profit daycare has just over 200 child-care spots in four locations, but it's operating at 20 per cent capacity right now because most parents are keeping their children home, said Szautner.

Still, she's trying to keep all 45 employees on the payroll as long as possible in case demand surges among essential service workers, and to help her staff pay their bills.

On Friday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced more help for small and medium-sized businesses, which would include daycares, to keep employees on the payroll during the COVID-19 crisis, including a 75 per cent wage subsidy and guaranteed interest-free loans.

The daycare boss is trying to figure whether federal and provincial programs will make up for revenue shortfalls.

"Many parents are living on reduced income, or a spouse has been laid off, some are working from home [and can care for their own children], so right now, planning for the future, it's day-by-day, hour-by-hour," Szautner said. "We're just trying to do our best for everybody."

She won't charge parents fees in April if they're not using the service, and will guarantee their spot for the future.

On Friday, the province told CBC News by email that it would continue to provide its regular government grants to all licensed child care facilities regardless of whether they remain open or temporarily close.

In addition, it's working on extra money for daycares that serve essential service workers.

"We are working to finalize additional funding to support their ability to respond to the demand as it evolves," the statement said.

Judy Henley, president of CUPE Saskatchewan, which represents 30,000 public service workers in the province, still has concerns.

CUPE issued a press release Friday morning calling for the provincial government to provide compensation for child-care centres so they can operate with reduced enrolment, as well as clarity on staffing and parent fees.

Henley said the government has placed a cap on child-care spaces — eight per room — but hasn't coughed up funding to cover the revenue shortfall in order to keep a centre open.

"They can't fully fund all the staff without being subsidized," Henley said.

Licensed child-care centres receive grants and subsidies from the province, in addition to parent fees. The subsidies, which are based on a parent's income and paid directly to a centre, are dependent on a child's attendance. Henley wants the province to pay the subsidies to centres even if children stay home.

On Friday, the government of Saskatchewan told CBC News that it won't do that.

"The children must be in attendance to receive the subsidy," a government spokesperson said.

Compensation in other provinces

Henley points to Nova Scotia, where 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.

In British Columbia, the province is providing compensation to centres that continue to operate with reduced enrolment, and centres that close will also receive support for lease payments or other fixed operating costs.

"The children are our future, and we need to make sure that after the crisis is over, that these facilities will be there in the future," Henley said, while calling for similar measures.

"Because in Saskatchewan, we don't have a lot of [child-care] seats, and if we lose seats now, it's going to be harder on parents [in the future]."

Henley is also concerned that workers are being laid off without notice or compensation.

"Some workers, at the end of the day, were told 'You're laid off,' with no notice. What has been said is they've waived the notice period, as per the Saskatchewan Employment Act, and that isn't sufficient, because why wouldn't they get proper notice?" Henley said.

"This is uncharted territory and we need to make sure we are compassionate to our workers," Henley added.

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