

Many NWT daycares and day homes stay open in a time of childcare crisis ^[1]

While schools are closed and youth programs cancelled, daycares and day homes in the NWT remain open – providing vital childcare, but not without concern.

Author: Blake, Emily

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EXCERPTS

The territory's chief public health officer, Dr Kami Kandola, has recommended school closures. However, her advice is that early learning and childcare programs stay open "wherever possible."

That's because the NWT government considers childcare critical for essential workers in fields like healthcare who are also parents. No childcare might mean losing front-line staff.

Day homes and daycares in the NWT are licensed by the Department of Education, Culture, and Employment. Many operators are self-employed.

The Alberta government closed daycares in the province last week. On Sunday, Alberta announced it will open up to 15,000 childcare spaces for parents and guardians providing essential services.

It's kind-of scary when you hear everything that's going on, but some people have to work.

- ANN CHARLES, DAY HOME OPERATOR

On Tuesday, the YK1 school district announced it now intends to keep its Yellowknife schools closed until the fall. Other districts are expected to follow suit, setting up hard decisions for parents who need income but have to be sure their children are cared for.

Adam Starrett is a Yellowknife parent who must still go to work outside his home. His child has been going to a day home since the schools closed.

Starrett said if childcare centres in the territory were to shutter, "it would definitely cause some stress on some families" and they'd have to consider options like one parent staying at home in a two-parent household.

The federal government has introduced an emergency care benefit for workers and parents. It provides \$900 every two weeks – for up to 15 weeks – to parents who are unable to earn income and whose children need care due to school or daycare closures. The money is available whether they qualify for employment insurance or not.

Starrett said he is concerned about the Covid-19 disease, for which no vaccine or treatment is currently available, but believes children can learn simple ways to help prevent its spread.

"Kids are very smart and they pick things up," he said by Facebook message.

The Department of Education, Culture, and Employment has asked early learning and childcare programs to make sure staff and children follow "healthy respiratory and hygiene practices."

Children and staff returning to the territory must self-isolate for 14 days, like any other resident, and anyone sick is to be sent home.

'People have to work'

Ann Charles runs a day home in Yellowknife. Since the public health emergency, she says, some parents are keeping their kids at home but her business remains open.

Charles says she makes sure children in her care wash their hands. She is regularly disinfecting touch points and surfaces.

"It's kind-of scary when you hear everything that's going on, but some people have to work," she said.

"Everybody just has to help out each other."

Brenda Thompson, who operates a day home in Hay River, said she has remained open especially to assist parents working in essential

services. Many of the kids normally in her care are also staying home.

“This thing does concern me, for sure it does,” she said of Covid-19, adding she’s thankful there are currently no confirmed cases in Hay River.

“Like they say on the news, this is the new normal and we’re trying to do the best that we can.”

Thompson said her biggest concern is that people self-isolate when they return from outside the territory. She has made her own travel sacrifice, ruling out visiting her grandson in Fort Smith for the time being.

“It’s not just protecting yourself, it’s everybody you’ve got to do that for,” she said.

Some childcare centres, like the Yellowknife Daycare Association, have temporarily closed. A notice posted to the association’s Facebook page from its board of directors says the daycare closed on Monday until further notice.

Full refunds are being given for March break and after-school programs “as appropriate.”

“Please be assured we will be ready to open the facility when circumstances allow us to do so,” the post reads.

Children’s First in Inuvik, which is licensed for 120 children, also closed on Monday for two weeks. Staff expect to re-evaluate that decision next week.

The Department of Education, Culture, and Employment says it will notify childcare providers and parents if the situation around early learning and childcare programs changes.

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