

To save child care sector during crisis, Vermont promises to cover tuition ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The state has promised a massive bailout to Vermont's child care providers to stabilize the sector amid the coronavirus pandemic.

In guidance issued last night, the Department for Children and Families assured child care facilities that the state will cover the lost tuition they would have received from families if they hadn't shut their doors to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Aly Richards, the CEO of child care advocacy group Let's Grow Kids, called the state's promise to pay tuition "huge."

"That will put us first in the country in supporting the early childhood education field to be able to literally reopen at the end of this. Otherwise it would have been a real question, for probably every single program in Vermont," she said.

The child care industry operates on notoriously razor-thin margins, and Vermont faces an acute shortage of providers, particularly in more rural areas. The financial fragility of the sector was brought into sharp relief early on in the crisis, when many facilities that shut their doors in response to the virus asked – and sometimes demanded – that families pay anyway.

Providers will need to pay all staff at full salary during the closure period in order to receive these payments from the state. And starting April 6, families will be expected to pay 50% of their original tuition costs in order to hold their spots when centers are finally able to reopen. If families un-enroll and don't pay, the state will cover the full tuition bill.

Richards said the group had not yet received word from the state about how much the effort would cost. Vermont is expecting to receive nearly \$2 billion in relief from the federal government for its coronavirus response, but how that money will get doled out is still unclear.

While child care facilities have been closed on the governor's orders, providers are allowed – and in fact, encouraged – to continue offering child care to workers considered "essential" to the state's response to the crisis. The state's list of essential personnel is lengthy and growing, and includes health care workers, law enforcement personnel, and grocery store employees, among others.

The latest guidance from DCF outlines the financial incentives providers will get for offering care to essential workers. For children 0-5, providers will get an extra \$125 per child, per week. Families who received subsidies from the state will continue to do so, and be required to keep paying their share of tuition. Private-pay families will continue paying tuition as they did previously.

For school-aged children, providers will receive an additional \$325 a week, but not be allowed to charge co-pays or additional tuition to families.

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