

Struggle to find childcare for B.C.'s essential-service staff highlights fears over sector's future^[1]

Layoffs, reduced cashflow, increased safety measures during COVID-19 pandemic add pressure to 'fragile' system

Author: Gallagher, Margaret

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EXCERPTS

Childcare providers are struggling to meet the needs of essential workers as they face layoffs, reduced cash flow and new safety measures to try to stop the spread of COVID-19.

It's led to fears among some advocates that pressures on the system during the pandemic could have lasting effects on an already fragile sector and lead to childcare shortages after the outbreak has been contained.

While scores of parents are now working at home or unemployed, essential-service workers still need care for their children in order to do their jobs.

The B.C. government has started a program to match such workers with temporary emergency childcare for kids aged up to five years, with Child Care Resource Referral Centres in 38 communities acting as hubs.

But finding licensed childcare is proving to be a challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic, for a number of reasons.

Mass closures and layoffs

Sandra Singh, general manager for cultural and community services for the City of Vancouver, estimates that less than one-third of the city's licensed childcare centres remain open, as parents follow orders to keep children at home.

The city is working with West Coast Child Resource Centre, the Vancouver School Board and Vancouver Coastal Health to allocate spaces.

Richmond Children's Centres are keeping two of its six locations open to serve essential workers, but has had to lay off 42 employees, executive director Nicky Byres said.

"We were hoping the wage subsidy would be quickly available, but as a not-for-profit, we can't afford to wait six weeks to see those funds flow," Byres said.

Health and safety measures

Those childcare centres that remain open are taking extra measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The YMCA has brought in daily health declaration forms, health screening, and increased sanitation and handwashing at its 58 locations in Metro Vancouver, the Fraser Valley and the Sunshine Coast.

In addition, children or staff with recent symptoms are asked to self-isolate for at least 10 days, says Cathy Poole, vice-president of children and youth services for the YMCA.

Such measures have placed an additional burden on what childcare advocate Emily Gawlick calls an "already fragile sector." Gawlick, executive director of Early Childhood Educators of B.C., points to the pressures of sourcing scarce cleaning supplies and food, and the challenges of providing childcare while maintaining physical distance.

"We don't have a system in place to support us, and the biggest concern we have is that what's happening now has been downloaded to the sector," says Gawlick, who sent a letter of recommendations to the province on March 27.

Long-term impact

Gawlick is also deeply worried about the long-term impact on a sector that already struggles with recruitment and retention, from the students who aren't able to finish practicums to the fate of workers who've been laid off.

That issue is top of mind for Mark Wong, who owns Little Cedar Montessori Preschool and School Age Care.

Little Cedar's two locations normally serve about 70 children, but he's now down to a handful of children whose parents are essential workers. He's laid off all of his staff, except himself and his wife Cindy, as they struggle to meet \$11,000 in monthly rent.

"I don't know if we can recover at this moment because it's such a big loss," says Wong, who is in discussions with his landlords about deferring some of his rent. "And, secondly, we don't know where my staff is going to be ... when this whole thing is all over. It's like basically starting the business all over again."

Wong says he spoken to other providers who are likely to close permanently because of the high overheads they face. He worries about what that will mean when people return to work and children go back to school.

"This problem of lack of childcare or not enough childcare in neighbourhoods is going to pop up again ... therefore, we've got to continue to provide service."

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Region: British Columbia ^[3]

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