

Alberta allows 190 child-care centres to reopen but only a few offer \$25/day rate ^[1]

'These spaces ... could be going to people who are our heroes right now'

Author: Labby, Bryan

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EXCERPTS

Another dozen or so daycare centres opened up across the province last week for the children of workers deemed essential during the COVID-19 crisis.

The province has allowed 190 facilities to reopen, but only 13 offer \$25-per-day spots.

The reopenings allow children a place to go while their parents work at nearby hospitals, health-care facilities, grocery stores and other businesses that are considered indispensable.

Jen Lugg, whose son Zach goes to one of the reopened centres, says it's been "wonderful" to have access to child care.

"My job isn't one I can do from home, and knowing my son is happy, healthy and being taken care of means the world to me," she said in an email to the CBC News.

The province initially shut down all licensed child-care and out-of-school care centres last month. The reopened facilities provide enough space for 4,100 children.

However, only 13 of the centres are offering \$25/day spots, which were created three years ago by the previous NDP government.

It's left some operators of those facilities — approximately 100 province-wide — wondering why they haven't also been allowed to reopen.

"We want people to know that this is happening, that these spaces that could be going to people who are our heroes right now, at a hugely discounted rate, are not," said Tyra Richmond, the program director at the Bowness Montgomery child-care centre, which is operated by a non-profit society.

Richmond said what's even more frustrating is that her centre has already received the funding to provide the subsidized spaces, which max out at \$525 per month, but her facility remains shuttered.

"The money is waiting there to be used," she said from one of the centre's empty classrooms.

Location, location

A spokesperson for Alberta Children's Services says the reopened facilities were selected based on their proximity to hospitals and urgent-care facilities.

"While Children's Services is coordinating these spaces, we continue taking advice from Alberta's chief medical officer and Alberta Health on the areas where more spaces should be open," said Lauren Armstrong.

The province added approximately 10 additional day centres last week, and more may be added in the following days and weeks. Along with Calgary and Edmonton, the spaces are available in 13 other communities.

The province has told daycare operators to charge the same rates prior to the health crisis and warned against gouging.

"We have asked all centres to charge their usual fees, within reason, and price gouging will not be tolerated."

CBC News contacted more than 70 of the reopened daycare centres in Calgary; however, only a dozen or so operators replied. Some said they'll be charging less, while others said there's been no change to their fees.

Subsidies for unfilled spots

CBC News has learned the reopened facilities will receive \$41 per day for every unfilled spot at their centres. The money is to be used to help cover operating costs, since the facilities are allowed to accommodate only 30 people, including staff. At this point, the province says

the program is estimated to cost \$7.6 million.

"That includes continuing to pay wage top-ups and subsidy for reopened centres, and the unused spaces and cleaning supplies grants," said Armstrong.

Every facility operator that replied to the CBC indicated they still have space available for children of essential care workers. That's not a surprise, since the province says only 10 per cent of the reopened spaces have been filled.

Courtney Jennings, who is a director at Next Kids at Highland Park, one of the reopened centres, says they've received a list of new health precautions and guidelines that must be followed to prevent the spread of the disease.

"We were sent, like manuals, on how to do care during this pandemic," said Jennings.

The centre has taken in only four children so far, but she expects demand to increase as the pandemic isn't expected to peak for several more weeks.

"I think we're going to need more spaces once that time comes when parents start feeling that crunch for care," she said.

Home-based child care centres with six or fewer children have been allowed to continue operating in Alberta.

Extra burden for essential workers

The Alberta Federation of Labour says the provincial government should be doing more to assist workers who can't work from home. It suggests a subsidy for all parents who've been deemed an essential service.

"That means that families aren't carrying this extra burden of cost. Because they're the ones we're saying you have to go to work because we need you. But then we're saying to them, it's also going to cost you extra, but we're not providing that support," said Siobhan Vipond, the AFL's secretary-treasurer.

Tyra Richmond says she's still waiting to get the call to reopen her facility in the northwest community of Bowness.

"Being close to Foothills hospital, nurses, doctors, firefighters, police have reached out to me, wondering why the province didn't choose us," said Richmond.

"Subsidized child care, it's already here, it's already paid for. Why isn't it open to the public?"

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