

Sault YMCA childcare opens its doors for essential health care workers ^[1]

The Ontario government has approved an application that will allow the Sault YMCA daycare site open its doors to essential health care workers requiring childcare services. The process is by application only.

Author: Della-Mattia, Elaine

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EXCERPTS

A childcare service dedicated to help essential health care professionals is officially opened its doors in Sault Ste. Marie.

While attendance numbers of staff and children are currently small, the centre is expected to ramp up its operations as applications to social services increase and are vetted. The process opened last Thursday.

Staff at the YMCA daycare received training on proper procedures last week by Algoma Public Health and the centre was thoroughly cleaned and disinfected prior to opening.

The dedicated childcare centre is a partnership between the District of Sault Ste. Marie Social Services Board (DSSAB) and the Sault Ste. Marie YMCA.

DSSAB received approval from the Ontario government to open the first centre in the community to provide licensed emergency child care for children of health care providers and other essential service workers last week.

The centre will operate from the Sault Ste. Marie YMCA and will be open for 14 hours a day, seven days a week, based on need, said DSSAB CEO Mike Nadeau. The centre will be open extended hours from 6:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. to accommodate essential health care workers.

"We've been asking essential service workers to contact us if they need the service and we are working with them," Nadeau said. Priority will be determined by social services based on eligibility and available spaces.

Nadeau said an application to the province was approved within a week after the DSSAB made inquiries with health service organizations to determine the local need for the service.

"Once we determined there was a need, we submitted the application as required by the province," Nadeau said.

The Sault Ste. Marie YMCA is already an approved licensed childcare provider who works in partnership with social services, said YMCA CEO Tracey Cooke.

"The McNabb Street location was ideal due to location and layout of the facility. In support of our community's response to COVID-19, it made sense to reopen the main YMCA McNabb Street licensed childcare location to support these efforts," she said.

The emergency childcare service is only applicable to the licensed portion of the facility on the upper level.

The remainder of the YMCA will remain closed under the provincial emergency order.

Access will be limited to the childcare entrance only, Cooke said.

The application process set out the practices and procedures the facility would follow, based on guidelines set by Algoma Public Health, Nadeau said.

Emergency child care services are reserved exclusively for children of essential and critical service workers identified in the Province of Ontario's "List of Workers Eligible for Emergency Child Care," and who have limited alternatives. The number of people in the building will be limited to 50.

In addition to the existing Child Safety and Protection policy the YMCA follows, additional health and safety measures have been implemented based on the advice from APH, Cooke said.

Additional measures include additional staff dedicated to cleaning and disinfecting the site, daily health screenings for all before entering the site, restricted access to program space and regular handwashing and sanitizing of high touch surfaces, she said.

"For 120 years, the Y has been here for our community in times of crisis, and this is no different," Cooke said. "We have been working diligently on plans to provide needed services to Sault Ste. Marie and are proud to partner with social services to support our front line workers by providing emergency child care."

Cooke said that she's proud of her staff for providing the service during difficult times when the YMCA cannot support the community in its traditional ways.

"It feels amazing that we can continue to be there even during a time of crisis such as this," she said. "We continue to look at opportunities to support our community and have been engaging with community partners about other ways in which we can help."

Early childcare educators who normally work at the YMCA daycare facility will be called back to work as need arises and DSSAB is providing a \$3 per hour subsidy for their wages, Nadeau said.

The childcare groups will still operate by ages but the typical ratio for the children to child care workers will be reduced, he said.

Those eligible for emergency child care include regulated health care professionals, unregulated health care providers working in health care, paramedics, police officers, firefighters or individuals providing fire protection services, as well as individuals who perform work that is essential to the delivery of core services in a municipality.

Child care staff who are working in the emergency child care program are also eligible to access this care.

Nadeau said a town hall teleconference was held Thursday that included about 79 early childhood educators to provide them with an opportunity to ask questions and get answers.

Each child, parent and employee going into the centre will be screened outside daily, prior to drop off. Temperatures will be taken daily at

the childcare centre and health declarations will be required on a daily basis. Anyone who is ill or has been ill will not be permitted into the facility or allowed to attend the daycare.

“Early childhood educators that are coming in and responding to the community are important to our essential health care workers and hats off to them and the YMCA who have partnered with us. If it wasn’t for them we wouldn’t be able to do this,” Nadeau said.

Essential service workers are to complete and submit the online application available at www.socialservices-ssmd.ca^[3] and will be contacted by Social Services staff to receive more information. The applications require information on the applicant, his/her employment information and the days and shifts daycare is required.

The Sault YMCA is also helping the community in other ways. It has also implemented virtual workouts, activities for kids and support for wellness through its website.

“This week we will be reaching out to our senior member population to check-in and ensure that they have the supports that they need through this period of self-isolation,” Cooke said.

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