

Province pushes for more daycares to reopen ^[1]

Child-care officials seek clarity on role, safety of workers during pandemic

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EXCERPTS

The province is calling on more daycares to reopen as it prepares to extend child care to all essential workers next week, though it's unknown how many additional spaces are needed.

"That depends on how many people come forward," Families Minister Heather Stefanson told reporters during a news conference Thursday afternoon. "But we still need more childhood facilities and early childhood educators to answer the call during this difficult time."

Last week, the province asked centres to reopen to meet the child-care needs of health and emergency services workers. So far, more than 1,900 children have been matched with daycare spaces across the province, representing placements for more than 90 per cent of front-line workers seeking care.

Families who remain on a waitlist will be matched with a spot before the access is extended to all critical service workers — such as grocery store employees, construction workers and bank staff — on April 14.

Beginning Friday, parents working in those sectors deemed essential will be able to access a database of available daycare spaces on the province's COVID-19 website. Eligible parents will need to contact daycare centres directly to arrange child care.

During Thursday's news conference, Stefanson lauded daycare staff who had gone back to work as "heroes helping heroes."

Jodie Kehl, executive director of the Manitoba Child Care Association (MCCA), said the recognition is appreciated but many of those returning to work still have questions about their role and safety during the pandemic.

The association published an open letter to Premier Brian Pallister on Wednesday asking for better compensation for child-care centres and staff, a lower ratio of children to adults and clearer directions from the province on cleaning and personal protective equipment rules for daycares.

"Our sector is in a place of fear right now," Kehl said. "For those that are opening up, we want to make sure that they are being financially supported, emotionally supported, physically supported so they can provide the best type of quality care."

The province is providing \$30 million in operating grants to child-care facilities over the next three months, but Kehl says that only covers a portion of what many centres need. With less revenue coming from parent fees because of the 16-child limit per facility, some daycares are now operating on a deficit.

The MCCA is also recommending higher compensation rates for early childhood educators working during the pandemic, similar to the hourly wage increases happening at some grocery stores. Kehl says this measure could prompt more educators to return to work, especially those who are reluctant to do so because they are now receiving the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit.

"It's not about wanting to be greedy at this time, it's just about wanting to be reasonable and provide adequate remuneration," Kehl said.

Daycare centres are eligible for the federal emergency wage subsidy, which provides up to 75 per cent of employee wages for businesses and non-profits, and the provincial government has launched an \$18-million grant program for early childhood educators who want to start an independent child-care service.

Since reopening, Kehl says many daycare operators have asked the province for clarification on cleaning and sanitizing expectations in their facilities and whether their staff members should be wearing masks and gloves while interacting with kids.

On Thursday, Stefanson said the province's chief public health officer, Dr. Brent Roussin, will be giving updated guidelines for the child-care sector in the coming days.

Kehl hopes the province's top doctor will clarify why daycare centres are allowed to care for 16 children, plus staff members, when the rest

of the public has been directed to limit gatherings to 10 people.

"It feels like a bit of a violation of that order," she said.

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