

Advocates say child care providers need pandemic relief from Ontario government ^[1]

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Source: The Canadian Press

Format: Article

Publication Date: 16 Apr 2020

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTED

TORONTO -- The province must offer financial relief to child-care providers across Ontario to ensure none close as a result of COVID-19, a coalition of advocates said Thursday, warning many centres won't be able to pay their bills as the pandemic drags on.

Carolyn Ferns of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care estimates as many as half of the province's 5,000 centres that are closed and not collecting fees during the pandemic are in financial trouble.

With their main source of income gone, many have laid off staff and cannot pay rent and other bills, she said, making the prospect of closures real.

Ferns said some childcare centres will be able to apply for the federal government's Canada Emergency Business Account, which was expanded Thursday to help cover the cost of rent, but that relief could still be weeks away.

Her group is asking the province to provide emergency funds to the centres to replace the fees normally paid by parents.

"We're concerned that those centres that are really in financial distress could be permanently closed, so parents aren't going to have that space they had before," she said. "We were already in a child-care crisis before the pandemic. Fees are already sky-high, there weren't enough spaces."

Last week, Education Minister Stephen Lecce said the province would prevent child-care centres from collecting payments while they're closed due to the pandemic.

Ferns said she has been in regular communication with the government about the situation, but the province has given no details on what a stabilization plan could look like.

"They won't discuss what options they're looking at, what they're doing or when," she said.

Lecce said last week he is working with both the federal and municipal governments to ensure the child-care system remains sustainable.

"Our government believes child care is important to ensuring that people could re-enter the work force with confidence that their child is cared for," he said.

Some child-care centres that are looking after the children of health-care and other front-line workers have remained open, but the rest have been shuttered due to the pandemic.

The co-owners of Blossoming Minds Learning Centre in Toronto wrote Premier Doug Ford this week and asked him to provide aid to prevent the closure of many facilities.

Krista Dahlgren and Maggie Moser say they would like to see the government do a variety of things to help child-care centres get through the crisis, including asking municipalities to forgive property taxes.

"There's rent, commercial property taxes and a lot of other monthly fees that just don't stop while the centre is closed," Moser said. "It's just a question of how long will we be closed for? ... I know for a lot of small centres it's going to be a very difficult situation to try to hang onto the buildings that they have."

Dahlgren said the centre has had to make the difficult decision of laying off its staff of 32 people.

She agrees parents should not have to pay fees when they're not accessing the services, but she had hoped the province would provide help to sustain the businesses when it announced the fee ban last week.

"It did feel like with that announcement there's no support for private centres," she said. "What are people supposed to do?"

Lidia Monaco, a vice president at community service agency The Neighbourhood Group, said the not-for-profit was forced to lay off 80 staff at its 10 child-care centres this week.

Monaco said it had hoped a government aid package would keep the workers employed and helping parents by providing educational programming for their children remotely.

"If we could have thousands of people not being laid off, that's really helpful to the system and those families that we now can continue to stay connected to," she said.

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