

Financial uncertainty as childcare forges on during COVID-19 ^[1]

When daycares in the Northwest Territories aren't sheltering children from pandemic street harassment, they're confronted by another kind of threat: going broke.

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EXCERPTS

Many NWT daycares and day homes have remained open during the Covid-19 pandemic, at the request of the territory's chief public health officer, to provide childcare for essential workers.

Dr. Kami Kandola wants the daycares open to remove obstacles for those needed on the front line.

To open up spots for essential workers, the Yellowknife Day Care Association gave other families the option to opt out of its services and skip payment.

Ryan Fequet, the association's president, said around 75 percent of its members went ahead and opted out. With membership fees making up two thirds of the daycare's monthly revenue, he said the association could lose "tens of thousands of dollars."

Fequet said he is concerned about what that might mean for the association's future. "Our job as directors is to make sure this daycare lasts and exists when this is all over," he said. "It's a fiduciary job."

In Inuvik, the Children First Society is facing similar losses.

Director Patricia Davidson said the society normally has 90 to 95 children in its care, though it is licensed to support 127.

Now, only about 25 children attend. Davidson said family fees are essential for the society to achieve "some of their funding goals."

"With the number of families being down in our full-time program, we've lost quite a substantial percentage of that," she said.

"At this point in time, our revenue is lower than our expenditures."

'A lot of uncertainty'

To help ease financial pressure on daycares, the NWT's Department of Education, Culture, and Employment (ECE) announced last week it would put \$5 million toward childcare in the territory.

Funds will subsidize costs for parents, top up wages for staff, and help childcare providers buy cleaning supplies and pay fixed costs such as rent and utilities.

ECE hopes the money will help providers survive Covid-19 restrictions, said Shelley Kapraelian, the department's director of early childhood learning.

When Davidson saw that funding announcement, she was excited.

"ECE has been very supportive through all of this," she said. "I'm just waiting to hear back about how exactly [the funding] is going to impact the Children First Society."

"You can only stretch budgets and resources so far," she added.

Fequet said losing a large chunk of income had led to anxiety at the Yellowknife Day Care Association. "It's a lot of uncertainty," he said.

No definitive timeline

One childcare provider was left in the dark about the financial help.

Shamayla Mirza runs Aurora Learn and Play, a licensed day home in Yellowknife. When asked by Cabin Radio about the funding, she said it was the first time she had heard of it.

Mirza is facing a similar income loss. She typically cares for six children, but three are now staying at home with their families. Mirza has lost about half of her monthly income.

“I have concerns, because I have to give mortgage and stuff like that,” she said.

“Before, I could cover everything. But now it’s less, so it’s hard. I don’t know what will happen in the future.”

Mirza said she had not been contacted by ECE, although Kapraelian said the department emailed licensed providers last week.

Both the Yellowknife Day Care Association and the Children First Society have provided ECE with registration numbers and are awaiting further information, but said they haven’t been given a definitive timeline.

Kapraelian said childcare providers can expect more information on how the funding will work some time this week.

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