

No start day yet for New Brunswick daycares ^[1]

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Source: CBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 7 May 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

As New Brunswick's economy slowly opens up, the province's daycares are waiting for the call to action, says the head of the group that represents them.

They know they're on deck, but they're not sure exactly when they'll be open for business, says Jean Robinson, president of Early Childhood Care and Education New Brunswick.

Robinson said she got an email from the province last week, informing her that government officials were working on a plan to reopen, but so far, no date has been set.

"We've been politely asked to just hold on because they are trying to process everything and get everything lined up so that all department heads know what's going," she said.

The email promised more information this week.

Robinson said operators will be invited to a webinar, or something similar, to help to bring them up to speed on what will be expected of them when the sector gets the green light.

She's pretty sure things will not return to the way they were before March 16, the day the province ordered most daycares to close because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The only child-care centres that remained open were limited to the children of essential workers.

Robinson suspects that all daycares will be expected to operate under the same conditions that currently govern those that stayed open for essential workers.

Those facilities are required to follow the advice set out by the province's chief medical officer of health, which included limiting numbers, and ensuring physical distancing and proper hand hygiene.

So all we have to do is know what our new rules are, and what is expected.- Jean Robinson

The province didn't respond on Thursday to the question about when daycares might open.

Tara Chislett, a spokesperson for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, said, "We know having access to safe child care is crucial as parents begin going back to work.

"The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development will be working with early learning and child-care operators to ensure parents can access child care as we move through the various phases of recovery, however this will take time.

"Once early learning and childcare operations are able to resume, operators will be required to implement increased safety measures, as advised by Public Health," wrote Chislett in an emailed response to questions.

On April 29, Premier Blaine Higgs was optimistic daycares would start to reopen soon, especially with the "willingness" from operators to "step up."

This week, he has been advising businesses to be prepared for the next phase of recovery and indicated it could start Friday.

Under the next, or orange, phase, there would be a progressive opening of businesses under "strict controls." The availability of daycare would also be expanded, also with "strict controls."

There are more than 800 daycares in New Brunswick, and close to 600 have said they want to start running again, Higgs said.

Robinson said her Lincoln Childcare Centre is one of those 600 centres that are eager to reopen, but she worries that if they aren't given enough time to prepare, "it will be a circus."

Robinson said her operation could be up and running within three or four days, but she knows that others will need a lot more time than that.

"So all we have to do is know what our new rules are, and what is expected," she said.

For example, "if we have 42 little dinky cars, and only five children can play in that room ... well, guess what? I'm not going to have 42 cars in that basket that I have to wash before another group of children comes in and plays. I'm probably only going to have a dozen cars, right?"

Robinson said many operators are also dealing with the uncertainty of how many families will be coming back at each stage of the province's recovery plan.

Demand might go up gradually

She said some parents may not return to work even when their employers are back in business, since employers will likely bring workers back gradually, rather than all at once.

If that's the case, said Robinson, "then we wouldn't need to call back all of our staff."

That's why it's so important to get a bit of notice from the government about what the return to work will look like.

She estimates that she has 10 or 12 families who are essential workers who will need to return to her centre immediately. They're currently at facilities that remained open, but those spaces will have to be freed up for returning children.

"So I would probably say I could easily, on the first day, have 30 children here."

Out of 66 families who use Robinson's centre, only two have said they won't be sending their children back until schools open — presumably in September.

Will spaces be held?

As to whether old spaces will be held for children, Robinson said individual operators will have to decide that for themselves.

Normally, she said, daycare spaces are in such high demand, openings can be filled the same day.

"But these are different times now," she said.

"It really all comes down to finances, and do we take on that new family because there's a mortgage, rent, insurance, groceries. Probably a lot of money is going to go into sanitizing now. You know, all those new expenses and existing expenses."

Robinson said she's putting her faith in the system and in the experts to make the call about when it's safe to open daycares and what measures need to be implemented.

"Whether we like it or not, it's what we have to do for right now," said Robinson. "It's not going to be forever and ever. We still have to be calm and use our common sense and figure it out."

Region: New Brunswick ^[3]

Tags: health and safety ^[4]

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