

# Alberta to reopen daycares with limited capacity, health screening<sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Alberta daycares preparing to open as early as Thursday will be limited to 10 people per room and must implement increased cleaning and daily health screening to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The province has distributed guidelines to child-care providers ahead of the first phase of its relaunch plan, which will also include the reopening of retail stores, restaurants and other businesses. Cabinet will decide in the coming days whether the province is prepared to stick to its May 14 date after considering the number of COVID-19 cases, as well as the availability of testing and other public-health measures.

Daycare operators had warned they may not be ready to open this week, especially as they waited for the province to tell them what rules they would need to follow.

Daycares were closed in mid-March, although a limited number of operators have been open for weeks to care for the children of health care staff and other essential workers. Small private home daycares have also been permitted to operate through the lockdown, and health officials have noted there have been no COVID-19 cases in home daycares or in the centres kept open for essential workers.

The new guidelines set a maximum of 10 people, including children and staff, for each room. Centres with multiple rooms can have as many as 30 in their program, as long as they are separated into groups of 10 in different rooms and don't congregate.

Daycares will only be permitted to open if there are no reported outbreaks at their centres or within the larger community, although that is not defined in the guidelines. Any daycare connected to a case of COVID-19 will be required to close for at least 72 hours to allow for contact tracing.

Children, parents and staff must not enter a daycare facility if they have any symptoms and parents must take their childrens' temperatures each morning before bringing them in. The province has provided a standard questionnaire to conduct daily health screening.

Parents will be encouraged to provide their own snacks and meals, but daycare centres may provide food for children who show up with nothing to eat.

Masks are not mandatory for staff.

Anita Turna, chair of the Alberta Association of Child Care Operators, said the guidelines appear to be very similar to rules already in place for centres caring for the children of essential workers. She said some operators will likely take their time opening, waiting until after the May long weekend or until June 1.

"I'm treating May 14 as a starting point, not necessarily a deadline," Ms. Turna said. "It is a quick turnaround, but I think it's doable."

The guidelines acknowledge that the limits on capacity may mean there will not be enough child-care spaces for everyone who needs them: "Not all families in this phase will be able to return to their former program and we should continue to encourage using centre-based child care if they have no other option."

Eventually, the guidelines will be expanded to 75 per cent of a centre's maximum capacity, with 20 people in a room for daycares and 30 a room for school-aged children in out-of-school care.

Ms. Turna said it's not clear how much of an issue the limited capacity will be, because some families may decide to wait longer before putting their children back into daycare. The reduced capacity will also cut into revenues for operators, though she said programs such as the federal wage subsidy and recent child-care grants announced by the provincial government will help.

Anil Karim, executive director of Kids U, which operates eight daycare centres in Calgary and nearby Strathmore, said the guidelines appear sensible. Kids U has been able to open six of its facilities for essential workers and Mr. Karim said the company plans to open all of

its centres as soon as it is permitted.

"As long as we're comfortable and confident that we can keep things safe and secure, then that makes sense to us," he said. "Is this the best scenario? No, but I'd rather be open than closed."

The province's Minister of Children's Services Rebecca Schulz said child-care is a critical part of the province's economic relaunch plan as workers return to their jobs. She said the guidelines have been drafted in consultation with Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Alberta's Chief Medical Officer of Health, and the minister is confident it can be done safely, though she acknowledged not all providers will be open on the first day.

"There's no obligation for centres to reopen and there's no obligation for parents to send their children back, but we're encouraging people to proceed safely and cautiously as we proceed from 'stay home' to 'stay safe,' " Ms. Schulz said in an interview before the new guidelines were released.

The Opposition NDP's critic for children's services, Rakhi Pancholi, said the government should have provided more notice to daycares and parents to prepare for the reopening.

"It's very clear that the decision to launch Phase 1 and to give that deadline of May 14 basically two weeks from when the announcement came out was completely unrealistic," she said. "And it was done without any clear planning."

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