

Phase 1 workers in northeastern Ontario struggling to get back on the job without child care^[1]

Some daycare centres fear they won't be financially able to re-open when province gives the greenlight

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EXCERPTS

Kaylee D'Angelo would love to go back to work.

But the 33-year-old mother of three from Echo Bay, Ont., has no one to look after her kids if she returns to the Sault Ste. Marie United Way as the office re-opens.

"It's just frustrating," she says. "I don't even know what else could be done instead. I'm just here with my hands in the air saying 'I've had enough and this is frustrating!'"

D'Angelo says even if daycare centres were open she'd be "leery" about sending her kids to a place where they had a higher chance of catching COVID-19.

And she's also nervous about hiring a babysitter.

"Outside of a pandemic, I'm pretty iffy on who I would want to trust with my children and be in my home," says D'Angelo.

"I cannot afford to pay someone to look after them full-time so I can work."

Karl Muttenthaler is also frustrated with the tough spot he finds himself in, but doesn't know who to blame.

The father of two from the Lively area of Greater Sudbury started to go back to his job selling RVs at Nickel Belt Camping this week, but the one babysitter he found didn't work out.

"It has been more than a frustrating experience," he says.

Muttenthaler says after two months on the government emergency benefit he is eager to get back to work.

"Let's just say my credit rating is not what it was, even three months ago," he says.

And while he says his employer has been "very accommodating," he says he worries that if he stays home to look after his kids that he'll be replaced by another salesman.

"You know that's my personal concern and I wouldn't blame them if that's the route they take," Muttenthaler says.

Natasha Worthington has operated a home daycare on CFB North Bay for the past six years.

But while the province has allowed home day cares during the pandemic, the military doesn't want any visitors on the base during the pandemic, so she was forced to shut down.

The mother of two is now dealing with a drop in income and as an army reservist, she could sign up for summer duty, which could include working at nursing homes across the country, but that would be tough with a husband working full-time for the air force.

"I'd need to put my own son in daycare in order to do that," says Worthington.

"I'd rather just be able to open my daycare for the summer."

Some daycare centres are open for the children of essential workers, although they are not as busy as expected.

The Sault Ste. Marie YMCA only has 20 children signed up so far, but they are preparing in case the province opens up child care for other families or gives the greenlight to day camps this summer.

"Certainly if we can, we will be there to provide service to the community so that it makes things a little bit less stressful for folks having to head back to work," says CEO Tracey Cooke.

Mary-Lou Coffey, executive director of Walden Daycare in Greater Sudbury, says they do have plenty of room for more kids from essential worker families, but are also getting lots of requests from other parents hoping to get a spot.

"We get calls probably most every day," she says. "We've even had parents say 'I'll pay' but it can't happen."

Coffey says she too is waiting to see how child care fits into the province's re-opening plans, but says the pandemic is proving how essential day care is to the economy.

"The reality is you can't expect families to go back to work without child care," she says.

"I'm sure exciting things are around the corner, but I have no idea what they are."

Tracy Saarikoski, executive director of Discovery Early Learning in Garson, says she worries that some daycare centres won't be able to re-open.

"If we don't look at what a real recovery plan looks like," she says.

"We need to have some real emergency funding to support professional wages."

Saarikoski fears that the province is going to cut the general operating grants for child care centres, and the \$2 per hour wage subsidy for some early childhood workers.

Saarikoski says physical distancing rules will mean fewer kids in the daycare and less money coming in to pay the bills.

She also wonders how many families will be able to afford daycare after being off work for so long.

"It's free for essential service workers, so why isn't it free for everyone moving forward?" Saarikoski says.

Education Minister Stephen Lecce said in a statement that the province is working with municipal and federal governments "to ensure they remain sustainable and ready to re-open."

That includes provincial funding for "fixed monthly overhead costs" and waiving the licensing fees that daycare operators pay.

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