

Nova Scotia health-care workers calling for more support in child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Nova Scotia announced Tuesday that child-care centres will be opening June 15 beginning with 50 per cent capacity.

Some say reopening closed businesses before daycares is a backward plan, and that the province has not done enough to support essential workers who are parents.

Cora Haggett is a licensed practical nurse at the Halifax Infirmary, and the mom of a 20-month-old daughter.

Her family has been struggling since daycares closed.

“It’s almost like we were kind of forgotten,” she says.

Haggett’s partner Matthew is an aircraft maintenance worker, which is also considered an essential job.

With no licensed child care open to look after their daughter, Haggett and her partner took turns having unpaid days off from work.

Overall, Matthew has taken at least 16 unpaid days. Haggett used the only five vacation days she had, and switched to mostly night and weekend shifts.

Haggett believes Nova Scotia should have done more for children of essential workers.

“We listened to those press conferences every day ... we kept waiting, and waiting and nothing ever happened,” she says.

“Here were at home, living on a reduced income to essential employees, trying to look after our child, with no support, during a pandemic.”

Several provinces have opened child-care centres designated specifically for health-care workers.

Ontario was the first to do so. In March, Toronto opened four child-care centres for health-care and front-line workers. Now, it has eight.

Nova Scotia Education Minister Zach Churchill says this option was on the table for the province at first.

However, he says in some of the provinces where child-care spaces for essential workers did open up, there wasn’t a big uptake.

Global News reported in March the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development said there were 1,774 children, mostly of essential workers, in need of a space.

Numbers of Nova Scotian children in need of licensed childcare have not been reported.

Churchill says, “we weren’t getting any indication that there was a major demand for this in Nova Scotia.”

The province allowed non-regulated child-care providers, with eight children or less, to operate during the pandemic.

“We believe we were able to deal with the majority of needs for our essential workers and frontline health-care workers with the non-regulated child care sector remaining open,” Churchill says.

He also said some workers were able to rely on family for child care.

For Cora Haggett, a family bubble was never an option.

Having her parents take care of their daughter would have put them at risk, because of her job in health care.

Haggett also says her situation is not an isolated incident. She says some nurses will even swap caring for each other’s children on their days off.

In a May 26 press conference, Premier Stephen McNeil said child care for health care and essential workers has been dealt with “organically” while daycares have been closed.

Haggett was disappointed to hear this.

“Saying there isn’t an issue is just not true. He needs to admit there is a problem,” she says.

Last week, doctor and single parent Monika Dutt told Global News there have always been issues with child care in Nova Scotia.

“I don’t know that anyone is finding child-care organically.”

Dutt says “it’s taking effort and time, and for many people a lot of money that they may or may not have. I think it’s definitely a challenge.”

On Tuesday, the premier apologized for this earlier comments.

Another concern for parents returning to work before daycares open June 15 is the starting 50 per cent capacity limit.

Haggett says she fears her daughter won’t get a spot because she wasn’t a full-time member of her daycare before the pandemic.

“I have anxiety,” she says. “Two weeks from now, I don’t have a plan. We’ve been going week by week as it is, and now that daycares are opening, we’re in limbo again.”

Minister Churchill says the capacity will scale up as demand rises.

“Anybody who has already had a place in regulated childcare sector... we have been funding that, so no parent has lost their spot,” he says.

He believes there are still parents who do not feel comfortable sending their child into daycare just yet.

“We’ll also be funding those spots for the duration of the summer, until September, so parents have time to make the decision.”

Churchill says he expects daycares, which are private businesses for the most part, to be responsive to the most urgent needs in their communities.

For households and parents that have suffered financially during the pandemic, Churchill says they’re eligible for subsidy, which would cover up to 75 per cent of the cost of child care.

For the fall, Churchill says pre-primary school and the EXCEL program are set to go.

Cora Haggett hopes the provincial government will plan ahead with essential workers in mind.

“If there is a second wave, there needs to be a plan in place. This when you start the plan,” she says. “If we don’t have the care, I honestly don’t know what to do.”

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