

Ontario child-care centres can reopen on Friday, Ford government announces ^[1]

Province announced 230 new COVID-19 cases, testing numbers fell below target again

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Source: CBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 10 Jun 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

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Ontario will allow child-care centres across the province to reopen starting Friday, provided they adhere to strict public- health measures including capacity limits, enhanced screening for symptoms and a ban on visitors.

"We will take every measure necessary to keep the staff and the kids healthy," Ontario Premier Doug Ford said at a news conference Tuesday.

The new restrictions include:

- Children and staff will be limited to groups of 10 or fewer.
- All children and staff must be screened for symptoms daily.
- Thorough cleaning of the centre before opening and during the day.
- The removal of toys that are likely to spread germs.
- Requirement for a COVID-19 response plan if a staff member or child is exposed to the virus.
- Permitting only "essential" visitors.
- Pick-up and drop-off protocols that allow for physical distancing.

While the centres will be permitted to open as soon as Friday, when Ontario enters the next stage of its reopening plan, the province acknowledged that many centres will need more time before they open their doors.

"We know some of them will take additional time," said Education Minister Stephen Lecce.

Local medical officers of health will also need to approve the reopenings before they are permitted.

With new limits on the number of children allowed in most centres, the province said it would give priority to essential workers, including those currently using the emergency child-care centres set up during the crisis. Those centres are scheduled to wind down and pivot to regular child care on June 26.

The province will also continue paying the child-care fees for essential workers until that date.

Additionally, parents who do not wish to send their children to a child-care centre will not be charged and will maintain their space, Lecce said.

Officials did not make clear what would happen if there is a greater demand for child-care than available spaces due to the new size caps, though Lecce said the government is working off "assumptions" that some parents will choose to keep their children at home.

Staff at child-care centres can enter the buildings and begin reopening preparations immediately.

Ontario will also allow day camps to operate this summer, though overnight camps will remain closed.

Emergency funding needed, advocates say

People within the child-care sector say Ontario's plan to swiftly reopen centres will be difficult, and in some cases, impossible under the existing circumstances.

"For them to assume that child-care centres could scramble to reopen with just a few days notice and no new funding is frankly just ridiculous," said Carolyn Ferns, the public policy coordinator for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

Her organization had been meeting with the Ford government about its reopening plans, but she said few of their recommendations were included in Tuesday's announcement.

Crucially, the coalition is calling for significant emergency funding, about triple the government's current child-care budget, to help centres safely reopen.

Lecce pointed to a number of existing rent and wage relief programs during Tuesday's announcement, but he did not announce any new spending or programs to help the sector.

"That cost is going to be passed along to parents, who we know already couldn't afford child-care fees before the pandemic," Ferns said.

At least one Toronto child-care centre has said it will not reopen after hearing Tuesday's announcement, Ferns added.

The Ontario Association of Early Childhood Educators also criticized what it called the "vague health and safety guidelines" of the plan and repeated the call for extra funding.

New cases and testing numbers both decline

Ontario reported 230 additional cases of COVID-19 on Tuesday, a second straight day with fewer than 250 new daily cases, but the number of tests processed by the province fell below the target of 16,000.

The 0.7 per cent increase is the lowest growth rate seen in Ontario since early March and brings the total number of cases since the outbreak began to 31,090 — about 80 per cent of which are resolved. Some 337 more cases were marked resolved yesterday.

Only seven of Ontario's 34 public health units confirmed more than five new cases:

- Toronto: 114.
- Peel: 27.
- Durham: 10.
- York: 15.
- Hamilton: Seven.
- Windsor-Essex: 28.
- Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph: 11.

Of the seven, only Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph has been cleared to move into the next phase of the province's reopening plan on Friday.

The province's network of about 20 community, commercial and hospital labs processed 13,509 test samples yesterday, the fewest on any single day in nearly two weeks. The system has capacity to handle up to 25,000 daily, according to the Ministry of Health. However, more than 20,000 samples were added to the queue yesterday, so its likely that the number of completed tests will rise tomorrow.

Ontario's official COVID-19 death toll grew by 14 and is now 2,464. A CBC News count based on data from regional public health units put the real current toll at 2,508. About 77.5 per cent of all deaths were residents of long-term care homes.

Meanwhile, the number of patients in Ontario hospitals with confirmed cases of COVID-19 continues to decline, down three to 600 today. Those being treated in intensive care units fell slightly as well to 116. But patients requiring the use of a ventilator went up by seven to 88.

Starting Friday, restaurant patios, hair salons and swimming pools will reopen as the province takes a regional approach to restarting the economy.

The limit on social gatherings will increase from five to 10, but people must still stay two metres away from anyone outside their own household.

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