

Ontario's reopening is a mess. Just look at child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ontario Premier Doug Ford has received a lot of praise for his handling of the pandemic. He demonstrated a remarkably sure hand at the beginning of the crisis and has been uncharacteristically calm and reassuring.

But, as the weeks go by, it's increasingly obvious that despite Ford's clear, forceful even, statements about what the government is doing to guide and protect the province through the pandemic, his government is failing to deliver.

We saw this with lagging COVID-19 testing and the crisis in long-term-care homes. And now we're seeing the troubling disconnect between what the government says it will do and what it delivers play out with businesses and workers scrambling to navigate the province's chaotic reopening.

Child-care centres, for example, were given three days notice that they could open on Friday and handed 20 pages of new rules to follow.

The new safety guidelines the province is requiring — essentially fewer children and toys, no visitors and more cleaning — will increase costs and reduce revenues from parent fees. The government has, so far, offered no assurances of funding to cover those pandemic costs.

One child-care operator in Toronto says its revenue from parent fees will drop by more than 60 per cent under the new rules. Another told parents its costs to run the centre will be three to four times higher than normal.

Who will pay for that? Parents certainly can't afford to. If daycares can operate at only about half capacity, which children will even get to attend? What happens to the rest?

Ford dismissed the concerns about the rushed and poorly thought-out plan.

"If you aren't ready, don't open," he said. "No emergency here."

Only there is. Without child care how are parents supposed to go back to their jobs as more and more businesses reopen? And daycares, just like many other small businesses, are on the verge of going under and desperately need an economically feasible way of opening their doors while they still can.

No wonder child-care advocates and operators are calling Ontario's plan "half-baked, at best."

They're not alone. Plenty of other business and restaurant owners are scratching their heads trying to navigate their way through confusing provincial and local guidelines.

As Ontario reopens, retail and other low-paid front-line workers are increasingly being told to go back to work — but there's no plan in place for what happens if they get sick. Many don't have workplace benefits and Ford dismissed out-of-hand the federal government's desire to work with provinces to enact 10 days of paid sick leave.

"I don't support it," Ford said. "If they don't feel safe, they don't have to go to work."

For all his everyman talk, this demonstrates the premier's lack of understanding of the plight of Ontario's low-paid workforce. His grasp of how to tackle the spread of the virus as the economy reopens is shaky, at best.

Paid sick days can decrease the spread of illness. How can we reopen — without the surge in cases the province is trying to avoid — if people in front-line jobs, who risk being exposed and exposing others the most, are forced to choose between being paid or staying home sick?

For a while, it seemed as through the COVID-19 crisis was helping Ford and his government see the problems and inequalities in our economy more clearly.

Ford — who rolled back a planned minimum wage hike and two paid sick days when he first came to power — started referring to cashiers and cleaners as "front-line heroes."

His government, which killed a promising child-care plan, now says it "understands how critical child care is to getting our economy on

track.”

Ford, who loves to cut a budget, has said his government will “spare no expense” to get Ontarians through the crisis.

It’s unfortunate, as the economy reopens and the government’s intervention is needed as much as ever, to find out that’s all just words.

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