

The 'nice ladies of child care' are furious at lack of lead time and financial support from the province on daycare reopening ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ontario's plan to reopen child care as early as Friday is "half-baked, at best," say advocates and operators who are scrambling to meet new safety guidelines with little advance notice and no assurance of funding to support increased costs.

"The government is assuming the nice ladies of child care will just go back to their programs, move some furniture around and make this work the way we always have," said Carolyn Ferns, of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

"But what I am hearing from the sector is different from what I have ever heard before. They are just beside themselves. They say this is insulting. The government is expecting them to do something that is just impossible without proper support."

Premier Doug Ford announced Tuesday that daycares across the province could reopen starting Friday as long as they follow strict safety measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The protocols, described in guidelines released late Tuesday evening, are similar to those for emergency child-care programs currently operating for front-line workers. They include screening of all staff and children, enhanced cleaning, a ban on visitors, a limit of 10 people — staff and kids — per room, and the removal of all toys that can easily spread germs.

Donna Spreitzer, executive director of Jackman Community Daycare in Toronto's Riverdale area, said she was "blindsided" by the announcement and fears parents have been given "a very false sense of hope."

"Child-care supervisors are really committed to getting everything up and running ASAP, but parents need to understand ... it cannot happen over night," she said Wednesday.

Ontario's current emergency order closing licensed child-care centres doesn't expire until June 19, and for the premier to suggest centres can open a week earlier seems like "a political ploy," she said.

"Doug Ford wants to look good to parents," she said. To suggest daycares could open in three days "makes us look bad if we don't. Shame on him."

In Toronto, for example, the city's emergency child-care programs had two weeks to prepare before opening.

Due to the new smaller group sizes, most daycares likely won't be able to accommodate the same number of children as they did before they closed, advocates noted.

Spreitzer has 104 children from age two-and-a-half to 12 already signed up for care this summer. But with no clear rules on which families to serve first — apart from ministry guidelines that say centres "may wish to consider" giving priority to essential workers, those who have to work outside the home and children with special circumstances — centres will be "forced to ask parents to write letters pleading their case," she said.

"What a burden to put on an operator," she said. "I can see lawsuits saying we didn't chose this family because of 'X.'"

Centres could use a lottery to choose parents, she suggested. "But how would that be fair? What about child-care workers who need care themselves before they can return to work? Whose brain child was this?"

Operating with fewer children also means less money from parent fees. And yet provincial guidelines say parent fees should remain the same as before the pandemic, Spreitzer added.

She isn't sure how her centre, which operates out of Jackman Ave. Junior Public School, can remain viable without more provincial funding.

"It is an unsustainable model without the government stepping in with more fee subsidies," she said. "They have been subsidizing every family in emergency child care at 100 per cent until now. I don't know what's changed."

As an example of what Spreitzer is up against, she usually runs two groups of 30 school-age children (ages six to 12) with three staff during

the summer months.

Under the new rules, she will be able to provide only two groups of eight children and two staff.

Likewise, her 26-child kindergarten program with three staff will be reduced to just eight kids and two staff. The program's preschool group of 16 will also drop to just eight children and two staff.

Unless she gets permission to open more rooms in the school — assuming there is demand — her program will drop from 104 kids to just 36. While she may be forced to lay off staff — a prospect she dreads — her costs will likely remain almost the same, while her revenue from parent fees will drop by more than 60 per cent.

"I know parents can't afford to pay the true cost," Spreitzer said. "But who is filling that gap?"

During Tuesday's news conference, Education Minister Stephen Lecce said centres can continue to use federal and provincial programs for rent and wage relief and his ministry will help operators "on a needs basis to get them through this difficulty" for help with things such as additional cleaning staff and personal protective equipment.

"We're going to make sure there's flexibility in our support to really respond to challenges today, in the coming quarters, in the coming years, to make sure the sector is viable, (and) the parents can return to work ... with confidence that their kids are going to be kept safe."

Parents who choose not to send their children back to daycare won't lose their spots and won't be charged, he added.

A ministry spokesperson was not able to point to new sources of funding for centres beyond Lecce's announcement Tuesday.

The only mention of money during the announcement was a \$1,000 fine per day for centres that don't follow the new safety protocols, Spreitzer noted.

"They never mentioned early childhood educators either, which was disappointing," she said. "But we are up to the challenge. Staff are eager to get back to work. We want to open our doors. But it will be several weeks before we can put all the safety measures in place."

These measures include ordering masks, gloves and gowns as well as extra cleaning supplies. Spreitzer has to remove all the plush toys, carpets, wooden blocks, cardboard boxes and other items that can't be sanitized and rent a storage locker at between \$400 and \$600 a month to store the items.

And all centres have to write policy and procedure documents based on the new guidelines to be approved by the ministry and local public health authorities.

"But the biggest thing is to get staff ready and trained and up to date on the policies that haven't been even written yet because I've been waiting to get clarity on many of these things," Spreitzer said.

"In addition to the children's safety, I have to provide a safe workplace," she added. "There is a lot on our shoulders. I wish that the premier hadn't given a false sense of hope to families and made it seem we can get this up and running in three days. Because we can't."

Toronto mother Christine Montes has mixed feelings about centres reopening.

"On the one hand, working and still being present for my three-year-old has been very difficult over the past few weeks," she said. "At the same time, I don't feel that the plan currently on the table by the government is well thought out."

She said while she's "hesitant to return my child to daycare under any circumstances, I want some clarity" around the potential risks in the decision to reopen and if families are going to have to shoulder a fee hike if operators continue to struggle financially.

"Is the (province's plan) sustainable?" she asked. "I don't think this is something that is going to go away in the next few months."

Her son's daycare sent out a letter saying costs to run the centre will be three to four times higher under COVID-19 protocols.

"It doesn't say parent fees are going to increase ... but who is going to incur that cost?"

And if federal wage and rent supports end, "what is the province's plan to continue to pay and fund and support what's in place?"

She worries that if those questions aren't answered, especially around fees, families will make the tough decision for one parent to stay home "and that is going to have a huge, disproportionate impact on women."

Former premier and education minister Kathleen Wynne slammed the province for what she called an "unrealistic, ill-considered instruction that is bound to fail" and said the government should have sought input from child-care providers beforehand.

Providers "had expected that they would be given a longer lead time, that their recommendations would have been followed and that the government would have understood that new safety and staffing requirements would mean financial support," said Wynne, MPP for Don Valley West. "Instead, they have been told to increase safety and screening protocols, increase staffing, in some cases find additional space without additional funding and within three days."

Wynne also said while the government expects few children to attend, "if that is the case, how can businesses actually open without those workers, and how can child cares continue to operate without full enrolment — especially if the government refuses to provide adequate funding for these extraordinary circumstances?"

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