

Daycares can return to full capacity at Alert Level 2, but operators say it's almost impossible ^[1]

Government plans to move to Alert Level 2 on June 25

Author: Bird, Lindsay

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EXCERPTS

As the province prepares to move to Alert Level 2 next week, daycares will get the green light to operate at full capacity — but operators say the combination of young children and safety expectations makes that an almost impossible ask.

Daycares that are operating are doing so at 70 per cent capacity with a limited clientele, as well as receiving a government subsidy.

That cash runs out June 26, a day after the province plans to enter Alert Level 2 and allow daycares to resume pre-COVID-19 levels of children, as long as they adhere to physical distancing and a myriad other increased health measures that have yet to be released publicly.

Prior to COVID-19, the Growing Our Future Childcare Co-operative in Port aux Basques had 34 children spread through its three classroom spaces. In trying to figure out how to allow for six feet between each kid, the numbers aren't adding up for the centre's chair.

"If you do the physical math of classroom size and child allocation, it's virtually impossible to do this, to comply," said Corey Munden.

The government's policy for Level 3 states physical distancing "must be maintained to the best of your ability during group times."

On top of the physical constraints, said Munden, comes the reality of trying to keep those children apart, and he questions whether a return to full capacity makes sense.

"I don't think a hundred per cent reopening is in anyone's best interest at this stage, considering we're dealing with children under the age of five. Can you imagine trying to keep 34 children social-distanced in that environment? I don't know how you would do it with four or five. It's a very difficult task."

It's also difficult to reopen an economy without child care, said Premier Dwight Ball at the COVID-19 briefing on Wednesday.

"As people go back to work, they're going to need access to child-care spaces, and the owners themselves have been working with public health officials to do that safely," he said.

In the past few weeks, the co-operative has been trying to balance child care and safety, as 15 children of essential workers have been at the centre.

As that's been manageable, Munden said, in moving to Level 2 there's a hard choice ahead as government funding runs out and the choice has to be made whether to downsize for the long term.

"If we decide to go half capacity, well then we'll have to lay off child-care workers. And they are extremely, very difficult to find," he said.

To open, or not to open

A daycare operator in Corner Brook is going with a third option, and delaying opening until August in the hopes she'll have a clearer sense of how to care for her kids.

"What's been holding me back, basically, is the fact that how am I going to do this safely?" said Trudy Pearce, who runs Trudy's TLC Daycare.

"I've been planning and preparing different ways to be able to do that, but to be honest, at the end of the day I lie in bed and think, 'I hope this works.' It's stressful, for sure."

Whether or not we're comfortable with it, we kinda feel we don't have a lot of choices at this point.-
Trudy Pearce

Part of Pearce's stress is her specialty in caring only for children under the age of two, who by necessity require much more hands-on care and particular challenges.

"A lot of infants are teething, so you have toys in children's mouths. I'm trying to picture myself sitting there, playing with the children and taking the toy away, 'oh wait now, I gotta take that and disinfect it.' How's that going to look? I still can't visualize how that's going to look. It's going to be difficult."

Pearce administers a Corner Brook child-care group on Facebook, and says she's heard of other operators also delaying opening, but they're in the minority.

"Most of us are making a living doing this, so whether or not we're comfortable with it, we kinda feel we don't have a lot of choices at this point," she said.

'No consultation whatsoever'

Neither Pearce nor Munden disagree with the need to return to work, both to sustain their businesses and support parents who urgently need their services.

But with vastly different operating models, Munden said a one-size-fits-all return to full capacity doesn't make sense. And he's been trying to tell the government that for months.

"Right at the beginning, there was no consultation. no consultation whatsoever," he said.

Pearce said she has been talking regularly to the provincial inspector who deals directly with her daycare, but Munden said he has written to government officials, including the minister, to no response.

"I'd like to have a conversation about it, and maybe there's something I don't know. Maybe I would be educated on the thought process, but unfortunately we're getting talked to, or not being asked for opinions," he said.

In a statement, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development said "department staff have been in constant and regular communication (by email and by phone) with child-care service providers throughout the pandemic."

Munden said he'll keep trying to reach those staff as Level 2 looms, and his centre faces tough decisions as he considers the vulnerable charges ahead of him.

"We need to tread with caution, and make sure we have a low risk environment, so that our children are protected. That's the bottom line for us."

In the statement, the province promised to outline its child-care policies to the public when Alert Level 2 is confirmed.

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