

New Manitoba child-care group calls for immediate funding to deal with COVID-19 restrictions ^[1]

Grassroots group Childcare is Essential says many child-care centres are on brink of financial disaster

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EXCERPTS

A new grassroots group in Manitoba is demanding immediate funding from the province to help child-care centres struggling financially amid new COVID-19 restrictions.

The volunteer group, Childcare is Essential, launched a campaign at Kings Park Child Care Centre on Dalhousie Drive Thursday alongside parents, children, daycare directors and early childhood educators.

The pandemic has forced child-care centres to close or reduce capacity to maintain physical distancing guidelines, which has resulted in centres taking a financial hit, said Scott Forbes, the program co-ordinator at Kings Park.

While Phase 3 of Manitoba's pandemic reopening plan, which begins Sunday, will allow child-care centres to operate at full capacity, Forbes said parents should not expect programs to go back to normal.

"We still have to separate children in smaller groups," he said. "Right now child-care centres still have to operate under heavy restructuring."

More financial support is needed right now to help facilities cover added costs like personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies, while dealing with a loss in parent fees since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March, Forbes said.

"Child care has been used as a political football by every [political] party for way too long," he told supporters at the press conference. "There's been a lot of promises, but there hasn't been any significant action to overhaul or create a child-care system that works for Manitobans."

I hope this triggers a public outcry," said Kisa MacIsaac, an early childhood educator and mother of three who helped organize the event. "There's so many people out there and community members that just know child care is underfunded."

She'd also like to see wages increased for daycare workers. She says many child-care workers have left the industry because they can't make ends meet with a starting wage of \$15 an hour.

"As an early childhood educator who is also a mother, it's really hard to afford child care for my children," she said.

MacIsaac said access to child care is a human right, and she worries about an industry that was struggling even before the pandemic began.

"We're looking at a sector that needs to fundraise to make ends meet, we're looking at non-profit programs that have a deficit every year.

"It shouldn't be a struggle when you're providing an essential human service for our most vulnerable."

'Significant impact' from lost revenue

According to the Manitoba Childcare Association, no licensed centres have officially closed due to a lack of financial support during the pandemic, but they have been struggling.

"With the loss of parent fee revenues, of course it's having a significant impact," said executive director Jodie Kehl, though she added current provincial operating grants and federal subsidies are helping.

The situation is concerning, Kehl said, but she expects daycare revenues to pick up once COVID-19 restrictions are eased during Phase 3.

She said 69 per cent of licensed facilities are open right now at a reduced capacity, but expects more spaces will open once more parents go back to work.

Kehl agrees child-care facilities have been struggling and applauds the new campaign.

"The message that Manitoba children and families deserve licensed, high-quality, affordable child care is a really important message for our government to continue to hear."

The NDP's critic for child care says the Progressive Conservative government isn't getting that message.

"For the last two months the province has caused nothing but chaos and confusion for child-care centres and the parents who rely on them," Thompson MLA Danielle Adams said in a statement to CBC.

"The province refused to make up for lost parent fees during the pandemic, which forced many centres to layoff their staff."

A petition outlining those concerns with more than 2,000 signatures has been addressed to Minister of Families Heather Stefanson.

The province said it has already invested \$50 million in child-care centres during the COVID-19 pandemic, including \$30 million in operating grants.

"Our government recognizes the critical importance of child care for working families as our economy reopens, and child-care workers have truly been heroes helping heroes throughout this unprecedented public health emergency," Stefanson said in an emailed statement to CBC.

She also said personal protective equipment has been distributed to child-care facilities, and the province has worked with Chief Provincial Public Health Officer Dr. Brent Roussin on a practice guide for the facilities, which will be updated with their feedback.

The Childcare is Essential group will host a virtual town hall for the public next week.

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