

# Child care providers say Ontario government's efforts to help falling far short <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

TORONTO – The Ontario government risks gutting the child-care sector if it doesn't begin funnelling promised funds to beleaguered day-care centres that were shut down due to COVID-19, the organization representing the industry said Tuesday as the province's premier pledged to look into the matter.

An open letter from the Association of Day Care Operators of Ontario, which represents the province's licenced child-care providers, outlined a litany of concerns the industry faces as it tries to weather the storm caused by the pandemic.

The letter said most of the province's day-care centres are still closed weeks after being cleared to open, attributing the delay to a combination of precarious finances and a lack of provincial direction on safe reopening protocols.

"Independent licensed child-care centres play a vital role in Ontario's economic recovery," association executive director Andrea Hannen said in the letter.

"Ontario parents want to get back to work and they're relying on this government to take the lead on getting licensed child-care centres the funding, supplies and timely approvals they need to reopen."

Hannen said that while the province promised funds to help child-care centres both stay afloat during months of closures and defray operating costs rising due to the need for extra staff and personal protective equipment, most operators have yet to see any financial relief.

The letter estimated the cost of doing business will double in the weeks ahead, while revenue streams that were all but eradicated during recent closures will only rebound to about a third of pre-pandemic levels due to public health restrictions on the number of children that can be admitted.

The association said the funding shortfall leaves a number of independent providers, the majority of which are run by women, at risk of permanent closure.

It also said the province hasn't provided the sector with a clear reopening plan, largely leaving key details up to municipalities and regional public health units. It further alleged key Education Ministry positions related to oversight of the child-care sector have been left unfilled for months during a time of unprecedented upheaval.

While the ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment, Premier Doug Ford expressed frustration with the slow pace of government funding.

"I agree, nothing drives me more nuts than when government takes its time when people are in desperate need," Ford said at a news conference. "We'll make sure we get that flowing."

Ford challenged the notion that Ontario has failed to provide appropriate reopening guidance, however, asserting the government has offered clear instructions for all child-care providers.

Discussion around child-care came as some of the province's most populous regions made moves to make masks mandatory in indoor settings.

Toronto city council was poised to approve a temporary bylaw that would make it compulsory to wear masks in indoor settings such as businesses and public buildings until at least September. Mayors in the neighbouring communities of Mississauga and Brampton said they had plans to implement similar measures in their own communities.

Municipal leaders from the Greater Toronto and Hamilton areas had previously asked Ford to consider making indoor mask use mandatory across the province, a notion he flatly rejected on Tuesday.

But Toronto's chief medical officer of health, Dr. Eileen de Villa, said such a step could help regions move on to Stage 3 of the province's COVID-19 recovery plan.

"I cannot emphasize enough how important it is for all of us to remember that we are still in the middle of a pandemic," said De Villa.

Ontario Health Minister Christine Elliott said the province's residents would have to wait a bit longer to find out when Stage 3 could take effect.

"We still need the data from about another week to understand if there's cause for any concerns," she said. "But we are having discussions about going to the next phase, whether we do it across the province, whether we do it regionally, these are serious discussions that we're having."

Tuesday's provincial data on COVID-19 cases marked a return to the sort of levels recorded last week after a spike attributed to an outbreak at a farm in the Windsor-Essex area.

Ontario reported 157 on Tuesday, down from 256 recorded the previous day, and seven new deaths related to the novel coronavirus.

The total number of cases now stands at 35,068, which includes 30,344 marked as resolved and 2,672 deaths.

The number of people in hospital with COVID-19 dropped to 213 on Tuesday from 232 the day before. The numbers of people in intensive care and using ventilators also dropped.

The province completed more than 23,700 tests for the novel coronavirus over the previous 24 hours, according to Elliott. Of the province's 34 public health units, 27 are reporting five or fewer new cases, said Elliott.

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