

Daycares look to resume amid COVID-19 challenges ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It's been a challenging few weeks for the staff at Our Children, Our Future, a not-for-profit which runs several daycare sites in Sudbury and Espanola.

"To say that it's been a roller coaster ride for the agency would be an understatement," said executive director Susan Nicholson. "It's been very busy, there have been a lot of changes. Early on we had laid off all of our staff, the majority of our staff and we've started to recall segments by segments."

According to Nicholson, they've so far recalled 120 of their 190 staff to work.

Their two Espanola sites have already re-opened to a phase 2 approach where they're admitting 30 per cent of the kids that were attending before the pandemic.

Two more sites are expected to open in the coming days in Sudbury, including the one at Ecole Felix Ricard.

Nicholson says they've had to address challenges like ensuring staff have a safe environment in which to return, they're also dealing with funding capacity.

"With the new legislation ... with the reduced numbers of children, we still require more staffing for the cohorts with the screening and sanitizing and all of the precautions that are in place with the re-opening of child care," Nicholson explained.

Staff have been provided with personal protective equipment (PPE), creating a very different environment than the one children might remember.

Terry Deforge is the agency's director of programming. He's revised their plan five times already and he's confident more revisions are coming.

"Upon arrival, families will find a screening station where students and adults are screened to make sure they answer the questions and pass the test, so to speak, to make sure they have not been exposed to COVID-19 or have COVID-19 symptoms," Deforge explained.

Tape has been placed on the floor and across the seating areas to ensure social distancing for the children.

"One of the other things in this new normal, typically we would invite parents to bring their children into the childcare centre so they can speak directly with educators and see what the children have been doing, this is going to be different. Parents now will bring children just to the lobby where the screening station is and then they'll be asked to let the children go with the staff," he added.

Deforge says they are doing the best they can in order to support parents in getting back to work so they can support their families.

"I've been in this career for almost 36 years and I have to tell you, since March 13, if I did have hair it would be going grey," Deforge laughed "It definitely has been challenging but I have to tell you, we keep talking about community support, we couldn't do this without community support and we couldn't do this if our parents weren't so understanding."

"The policies and procedures that are in place are working and they're there to protect your child and to offer them a safe place," said Marlo Desjardins, a mother of two young boys at one of the Espanola facilities.

Desjardins' children have been at the OCOF site since the institution of emergency day care. She and her spouse work at the Espanola Hospital and she says it's been a tremendous help to the family.

She doesn't have to worry about the boys, they go to daycare and come back with smiles and stories about their day.

The couple took to Facebook in a bid to assure other parents who might have questions or concerns.

"The kids are happy and I think that's important," she said. "They were home and it was hard for them, they liked their social and wanted to interact with other children so it was becoming difficult to have them at home, just the two of them so now they have that socialization even though it may look a little different than it did before."

"The word of advice from myself would be to just be positive about it with your children, knowing there are going to be difference and talking to them about it," added Desjardins.

Nickel Belt MPP France Gelinis recently used her Members' Statement at Queen's Park to read a letter she received from a concern mother in need of child care.

"We've all been there, I've been there. My husband worked shift work and it was like he needed to leave home no later than 4:30 to make it for his 5 o'clock shift, I would finish at that hospital at 4 o'clock and it was like in the driveway. He'd say bye, I'd say bye and we're done," said Gelinis. "Those are really stressful times."

Gelinis is calling on the province to provide additional support for daycare and adds the economy will not recover if there isn't a "she-recovery."

"If women can't go back to work, if women have to quit their job to take care of children then there will not be an economic recovery," said Gelinis.

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