

'The kids are suffering': With emergency child care closed, some parents are running out of options ^[1]

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Marianne Ryan feels stuck in child-care limbo.

The Toronto labour-room nurse spends her days helping to deliver babies, while worrying about child care for her own two kids, aged seven and 10.

Ryan, a single mother, was using the city-run emergency child care for essential workers until it closed on June 26. But her regular daycare, Church Street School Child Care Centre, hasn't reopened due to low enrolment and increased costs, she said.

She tried the city's CampTO program, but it was full. She turned to the YMCA's summer camp program but says she was told she couldn't use her city of Toronto child-care subsidy there. She says the full cost of \$600 a week for her two kids wouldn't leave her enough to pay rent.

She feels lucky because her father drives from Richmond Hill to her home downtown three to four times a week to care for the kids during her 12-hour shifts. But she believes the emergency child-care program was aimed at helping essential workers like her, and then abandoned them.

"What are families supposed to do? I'm lucky enough I have my dad, but if he couldn't help me for some reason, or he got sick, I would have to quit my job," Ryan said.

She believes the province needs to do more to support essential workers who don't have many options, especially when it comes to child care.

"I can't work from home like other people, and I'm putting myself at risk and my kids at risk all the time," Ryan said.

Church Street School Child Care Centre did not respond to the Star's request for comment.

Chris Meyer, a spokesperson for YMCA of Greater Toronto, said while they couldn't comment on Ryan's specific case, Toronto subsidies are transferable to the YMCA if space is available. She said it's more likely an issue of available space at downtown locations.

"Finding child care in downtown Toronto was challenging even prior to the pandemic, especially for certain ages such as infants," Meyer said. "As a result, unfortunately not all of our Toronto locations have open spaces right now. We try our best to accommodate families, especially health-care workers who are a priority when registering new families."

Carolyn Ferns, of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, says Ryan's situation shows that the province's plan for reopening child care isn't adequate.

"It's a perfect illustration of the chaos that's really been created and, I think, really needlessly," Ferns said.

"We had been urging them not to close down emergency child-care programs. And rather than actually expand those programs to serve more families, they did the opposite."

She said it reveals the need for a total paradigm shift on how child care is operated in Ontario. She said the model before was unsustainable. Parents had to sometimes pay prohibitively high fees, while child-care centres had to operate at full capacity just to keep their doors open.

"We know we can't do that now because of health and safety. ... None of those things are going to work anymore because parents are impacted by the recession," Ferns said.

A spokesperson for the Ontario's ministry of education said they have instructed child-care service managers, who are the ministry's representatives in municipalities, to prioritize recipients of emergency child care when determining space availability.

In a statement, Minister of Education Stephen Lecce said the province's plan to support child-care centres enhances health protocols to keep kids safe and doesn't impose higher fees on parents.

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