

Fragile child care sector in Alberta hit hard by COVID-19: national survey ^[1]

Author: Johnson, Lisa

Source: Edmonton Journal

Format: Article

Publication Date: 17 Jul 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Alberta child care centres suffered more layoffs during the first six weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic than centres in other provinces, according to a national survey.

The July report from the Canadian Child Care Federation and Muttart Foundation says the Alberta sector was “significantly more exposed” to the negative economic and social impacts of the pandemic because of a lack of direct and immediate emergency cash from the province to child care centres that were required by public health orders to close.

The closure of child care centres in Alberta resulted in significant staff layoffs, with more than 55 per cent of centres reported laying off all their staff, as compared to 18.5 per cent of centres in Ontario, and 19 per cent in British Columbia, according to the report, which surveyed operators between April 27 to May 1.

In Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, “where provincial governments provided significant support,” 91 per cent and 79 per cent of centres reported no staff layoffs.

Ashleigh Reinhardt, owner-operator of Seeds & Sprouts Early Learning and Childcare Program, said her program is surviving and has rehired about one-third of its staff, but that was mostly due to federal support. Without early learning and childcare centres, parents can't re-enter the workforce, she said.

“So how are they planning on keeping us alive in order to be able to support the baseline of economic recovery?” said Reinhardt.

Seeds & Sprouts was able to access the Canadian Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance (CECRA) support, and programs like hers were also eligible for one-time payments from the province to cover pandemic related health and safety costs if they reopened.

Reinhardt said Seeds & Sprouts received \$1,500 for stuff like cleaning supplies and per-child fees since it reopened June 1.

The majority of childcare centre staff who received layoff notices in Alberta either applied for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) or employment insurance, the report said.

On May 6, just over eight weeks after the province declared the public health emergency, Alberta committed almost \$19 million in relief to childcare, \$11 million of which has now been doled out in the first and second phases.

NDP Opposition children services critic Rakhi Pancholi laid the blame on the government's existing funding structure before the pandemic, saying if the UCP didn't step up with significant support, the fragile sector could become crippled.

“The child-care operators that I speak to, the educators and the families, are in despair. They're feeling complete anxiety and stress,” she said, calling for a clear long-term plan that includes a universal \$25-per day program guided by an early learning and child care task force.

“We know that these centres can't continue to operate at this very low capacity without some immediate support from this government,” she said.

Children's Services Minister Rebecca Schulz said in question period the survey, which was conducted in mid-May, was outdated and contains inaccuracies.

Fifty-per cent of child care centres have since reopened, and occupancy is at 41 per cent, she said.

“This is the time for facts, calm response, listening to centres (and) listening to parents,” she said.

Lauren Armstrong, press secretary to Schulz, also pointed to Alberta's small and medium-sized business grants — up to 15 per cent of monthly revenue — to help with relaunch, in an emailed statement. Those grants were announced in June.

“Feedback from the child-care sector has been that the third phase of funding should be tailored to focus on gaps in supports already

provided, and we're gathering that information now," said Armstrong.

One in five Alberta centres closed between April 27 and May 1 reported they were either not sure of reopening or that they will probably or definitely remain permanently closed, the report said.

Close to half of the Alberta centres reported that the CECRA didn't work for them. Pancholi said many weren't able to access it because their landlords chose not to participate.

Alka Kalia, owner of Children's Academy Daycare Centre, said she wasn't able to access the federal CECRA for that reason and doesn't know if she will be able to reopen at all.

"Operators are struggling; they are afraid of the future," said Kalia. It also isn't clear to her what kind of support might be offered by the provincial government, which is creating a lot of uncertainty, she said.

Alberta-based respondents to the survey pointed to significant challenges with the Ministry of Children's Services' management of the pandemic including inconsistent and limited communications.

Also Thursday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced \$19 billion in direct recovery funding transfers to provinces, including cash earmarked for child care. However, no specific details were offered. Alberta's bilateral funding agreement is expected to be announced soon, Armstrong said.

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