

Ontario's child-care sector needs more support to survive COVID second wave, advocates say ^[1]

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EXCERPT

Child-care advocates and early childhood educators are calling on the province to provide more support for the child-care sector, which is struggling to deal with reduced enrolment and rising COVID-19 infections.

Without additional funding, many child-care centres won't survive the pandemic's second wave, said Amy O'Neil, co-chair of the Toronto Community for Better Child Care and director of Treetop Children's Centre, which has decided to close temporarily.

"There is a divide in the child-care community right now about whether or not child-care programs should remain open or closed," she said.

Individual operators have been put in an unfair position of having to decide whether or not they can afford to stay open safely, O'Neil said, adding that it's irresponsible for the province to expect them to stay open without additional support.

"The amount of individual responsibility and accountability falling on the shoulders of operators and non-profit boards of directors is unacceptable."

Along with the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and the Association of Early Childhood Educators, O'Neil's organization is asking the province to provide "stability funding" to child-care centres, reinstate the \$4/hour "pandemic pay" increase for early childhood educators and provide paid sick leave.

She said Treetop's board decided, in consultation with parents, to close their centre because the risk to staff had become too great. "Everyone is really struggling to find a middle ground for how we can support our families but at the same time we have a responsibility to our staff and their well-being."

According to the most recent data published by the province, there have been 397 cases of COVID-19 within child-care centres in the last two weeks. That accounts for more than 22 per cent of the total cases within the sector since the beginning of the pandemic. The majority of the recent cases — 60 per cent — have been among staff.

A spokesperson for Minister of Education Stephen Lecce did not directly answer questions about whether the province is considering any additional funding for the child-care sector.

"As we have done throughout this pandemic, we will continue to follow the advice of the Chief Medical Officer of Health and medical experts to keep children and staff safe," said Caitlin Clark.

Clark pointed to the \$234 million that was provided to child-care operators in the summer as part of the federal-provincial Safe Restart Agreement, and said that the "pandemic pay" that was in place for 16 weeks between April and August was always intended to be temporary. Regarding paid sick leave, Clark said that early childhood educators are encouraged to apply for the federal government's Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit, which pays up to \$500 per week, before taxes — which is less than minimum wage for someone working full time.

Since the provincial lockdown took effect Dec. 26, child-care centres have been allowed to remain open as usual for infants, toddlers and preschoolers. They have been closed to school-age children, except those of certain front-line workers the province has deemed eligible for no-fee, emergency child care.

The list of jobs eligible for emergency child care was initially restricted to workers in health care and public safety, but was recently expanded to include postal workers and some social workers, among other occupations. Teachers working remotely, grocery store clerks and transit workers remain ineligible.

Additional funding would allow child-care operators to reduce cohort sizes and therefore reduce the risk of transmission, said Carolyn Ferns of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. She added that reducing the size of cohorts is particularly important now that the more contagious coronavirus mutation — known as the U.K. variant — is spreading in Ontario. "The situation right now is so volatile," she

said.

A pandemic pay bonus for early childhood educators — many of whom are paid between \$15 and \$25 an hour, she said — would be an acknowledgment of the increased risk of their work. But more importantly, Powell added, if the sector was better supported overall it would be safer for everybody.

“Had we increased capacity in the sector, had we created new spaces in order to keep cohort sizes smaller, I think we could be providing care to a number of families in a way that’s much more safe and could contribute to reducing spread in communities.”

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: advocacy ^[4]

COVID-19 ^[5]

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