

Some essential workers need child care, and can't get it, says child-care centre ^[1]

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EXCERPT

There are a lot of questions around how to operate child-care services in Newfoundland and Labrador with the coronavirus variant circulating, and one centre in Conception Bay South says it can't look after some children of essential workers as management waits for answers.

Rules around how regulated child-care services will work under Alert Level 5 were released late Sunday night, and didn't address one crucial area in the eyes of Rhonda Lono, the co-owner of Activ-Time Preschool and Daycare: whether they could take in school-aged children full-time during the lockdown.

Lono said she was told Friday that because schools are open — albeit virtually — those school-aged children could only come to her centre after a normal school day ends, at 2 p.m.

As of Monday afternoon, despite asking for clarification, she hadn't been told otherwise, and had to turn away at least six children of essential workers, including frontline medical staff, for the day.

"They needed care at 7:30 this morning, but they didn't have it," she said.

To her, that flies in the face of public health's point to keep daycares up and running during the tightest restrictions, imposed on Friday as the B117 virus variant was confirmed to be involved in the community transmission and dramatic spike in COVID-19 cases within the last week.

"That's the reason daycares were permitted to open during Level 5 this year ... so we could be there for essential workers and support them in their child-care needs for when they need to go to work. That's obviously not happening for anyone who has school-aged children," she said.

The Department of Education said it's working with the English school board to find a fix. "The department is actively reviewing the issue of families with school-aged children being unable to avail of child care during normal school hours," a spokesperson said in an email. "We will provide an update once a solution is identified."

The department noted its measures are meant to keep as many children at home as possible, except those whose parents must leave the home for essential work.

It also said it's not developing any new guidance for operators. "Services should continue to follow current protocols," the email said.

Premier Andrew Furey said on Monday he realized the new measures for child-care may not solve everyone's problems.

"We recognize there may be individual circumstances that fall outside the parameters of what was announced. I encourage those individuals to reach out to the Department of Education," Furey said.

Nearly empty centre, but lots of stress

Activ-Time was a much quieter place than usual Monday morning in the midst of Alert Level 5, with only one child attending instead of the normal 94.

Public health officials and the Department of Education are asking only children of essential workers to avail of child care as efforts focus on getting the current outbreak under control.

That outbreak, with a far more contagious variant of the virus, has Lono worried, along with her staff.

"It's kind of stressful for everybody involved," she said.

"You know, we're following our policies, we're being careful as we can. But we're afraid we're going to bring COVID into our centres, of

course, because we have contact with so many people and families."

Staff are now wearing masks full-time in the centre's rooms, but Lono said getting much guidance about how to go forward has been slim. When her centre re-opened last spring, she said they did so armed with a lot of information: the number of children they could look after per room, sanitation protocols and guidance on if and how to serve food.

This time, besides being told to keep doing what they're doing, other information has been slim or nonexistent among early-childhood educators.

"We weren't given any guidance as to capacity levels this time. It took asking questions in order to get answers for that, and pass on information from different centre owners and ECEs to other individuals," she said.

"So there's a lot of things left out that we had many, many questions about this morning."

Region: Newfoundland ^[3]

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