

Daycares remain open in N.S. as COVID-19 cases soar, operators express frustration ^[1]

Child-care operators say they need more help to keep staff and kids safe

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EXCERPTS

Daycares in Nova Scotia will remain open as the province enters a two-week lockdown beginning Wednesday, including the closure of all pre-primary to Grade 12 schools.

The news Tuesday came as some daycare operators said staff are feeling anxious and unprepared to safely deal with the rapidly growing number of COVID-19 cases in the province.

Premier Iain Rankin and Dr. Robert Strang, the province's chief medical officer of health, told a news briefing that daycare staff and children older than two must wear masks at all times, except for when they're eating or drinking. There is an exemption for children aged two to four who can't be made to wear a mask.

"By protecting the communities around them, child-care centres can operate safely. They provide an important service, especially to those who need to go to work to keep essential services and supports running," Strang said.

Outbreak at Halifax daycare

Strang said several daycares have had cases of COVID-19 where someone associated with the centre was exposed while out in the community. For the most part, COVID-19 is not spreading in daycares, he said.

"We do have one daycare in the Halifax Regional Municipality that we're considering an outbreak within the daycare. But that's one daycare among hundreds in the province," Strang said. "Daycares remain a very safe place and we have protocols in place for them."

Strang said in general, daycares are closed for deep cleaning for three days after an exposure, and staff and families are notified.

He did not identify the daycare affected by the outbreak, nor did he say whether the outbreak is ongoing. When asked if the daycare is closed, Strang said, "They're looking at whether they need to close that one daycare." It was not clear whether that would be an indefinite shutdown in addition to a three-day cleaning closure.

Families, staff anxious, says daycare owner

Before Tuesday's briefing, two daycare operators told CBC News they have received no direction from Public Health, other than to reiterate the cleaning and visitor protocols.

"Families are concerned. And staff are carrying a tremendous amount of anxiety," said Michelle Cleary, who owns Maple Tree Montessori.

The daycare has two locations in Halifax. The bigger campus usually cares for 34 children, but only 19 attended Monday and Tuesday. The smaller campus cares for 16 children and 11 attended Tuesday.

"Our bubble isn't small. We are 34. We are bubbled with 34 families at this school, and whoever they choose to socialize with outside of their own family bubble. When you think about that, we're really not any different than public school," said Cleary.

'We should be prioritized for vaccines'

She said some of their families include essential workers, like doctors and nurses, who rely on her staff of 10 to care for kids aged three to five.

Cleary had her staff masking before it was mandatory and they are also seeking out asymptomatic testing.

"It doesn't make sense to me — if we're going to be open, then we should be prioritized for vaccines," she said. "I 100 per cent feel that way. I know everybody's anxious to get their vaccine, but I see us as essential. I see us the same as health-care providers."

Lindsay Awalt co-owns Mrs. Robinson's Child Care Centre in Fall River, where they care for up to 30 school-age children after school hours

and 11 pre-school children that attend part time in the morning.

She questioned why early childhood educators aren't vaccinated as essential workers.

"We're a bit frustrated, honestly. We kind of assumed if ECEs weren't going to be vaccinated along with other essential workers like LPNs and VON caregivers and whatnot, that we would be off if schools were closed or if there were high numbers of community spread in each zone, for example," she said. "But that doesn't really seem to be happening."

'Zero guidance' from Public Health, says operator

The centre was closed Tuesday and expected to remain closed Wednesday in part because staff didn't feel they could offer care as safely as they should.

"Child-care centres are not set up the same as schools. We don't have as many classrooms to cohort children into. Sometimes there's only one bathroom for one child-care centre," said Awalt.

Awalt works with three regular staff members, plus a substitute. Awalt said they've had "zero guidance" from Public Health.

Staff have been going for weekly asymptomatic testing and were wearing masks before it became mandatory.

No word on assistance if daycares close

Awalt said shutting daycares would cause other problems.

"Last spring when they closed centres, the provincial government funded child-care centres so they could still pay for their rent and their staffing, and they were still receiving their funding," she said.

"We would hopefully see that again this time if there had to be any sort of closure. We haven't heard anything if that would happen ... it would be pretty difficult to pay staff and rent and utilities if we don't have parent fees to pay for those things."

Meanwhile, Rankin said Tuesday any essential worker who needs child care can get help from the province at ecdservices@novascotia.ca [3] or 1-877-223-9555.

"We need to make sure that we're keeping our child-care centres open like they did in Newfoundland and other areas where they looked at this circuit-breaker approach," Rankin said. "We'll be there to support those that are having challenges."

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