

Alberta NDP wants immediate funding for daycare operators during COVID-19 pandemic ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Alberta's Opposition says the province needs to dip into surplus budget funds to allow child-care program operators to keep their doors open during the pandemic.

NDP critic Rakhi Pancholi estimates the Children's Services Department has about \$70 million in unspent funds because lower subsidies are going to care centres, a result of reduced capacity due to COVID-19.

Pancholi says that money needs to be spent now because many operators are facing serious financial hardship and may have to shut down as other COVID-19 support programs end.

"I've heard from countless child-care programs that are on the brink of closure," Pancholi, accompanied by some child-care centre operators, told a news conference Monday.

She said operators are still feeling the pinch as parents remain hesitant to return children to care centres or are either working from home or unable to afford care.

"Child-care operators are still experiencing the impacts of the pandemic, but now without the supports that came from the pandemic," said Pancholi.

Heather Ratsoy, an Edmonton daycare operator who was with the NDP at the news conference, said numbers at her downtown centre have dropped considerably because businesses have closed or employees are working from home.

"We are unable to meet our monthly expenses like rent, salaries and so on," said Ratsoy.

"(We) are in dire need of financial assistance from the province."

Children's Services Minister Rebecca Schulz was not available for an interview but her office, in a statement, said "We are seeing enrolment numbers going up, which means that more parents will be accessing the subsidy programs and expenditure costs will rise.

"And with almost five months left in the fiscal year, it's premature to comment on unused funds."

Schulz also announced that \$15 million of bilateral child-care money from the federal government will be used to help support daycare workers through COVID-19.

"This funding will help strengthen child-care programs that support children and their families in this province every day," Schulz said in a news release.

The government said the \$15 million will be used "for COVID-19 relief to further support operators as quickly as possible."

It also announced that \$19 million in previously announced federal funding has now been delivered to assist in attracting and retaining daycare staff.

Pancholi labelled the announcement a last-minute, ineffective deflection given that the bilateral money comes with rules that can't address the immediate crisis.

"The UCP hastily reannounced existing federal funding from the long-standing bilateral agreement, most of which cannot be used by providers to pay operational costs like rent or wages," said Pancholi.

She renewed her call for Schulz to conclude a deal with the federal government on its multibillion-dollar \$10-a-day child-care initiative.

Ottawa announced a \$30-billion, five-year plan in the spring to craft partnerships with provinces, territories and Indigenous communities for universal child care — the cornerstone of a plan to help families and get the economy moving.

The plan aims for a 50-per-cent cut in fees, on average, by next year and \$10-a-day care in five years.

Most provinces and Yukon have signed on, but Alberta and Ontario remain among the holdouts.

Schulz has said Alberta is seeking a deal that recognizes the large percentage of for-profit care centres in the province and one that respects the diversity of choice for child care.

Region: Alberta ^[3]

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