

Daycare centres struggle with staffing as pandemic drags on ^[1]

Daycare owner says she cut 5 toddler spaces, reduced hours due to lack of qualified staff

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EXCERPTS

A daycare provider in Ottawa says child-care staffing shortages amplified by the pandemic have forced her to reduce hours and cut the size of a cohort.

Karen Bolton runs three daycares in the nation's capital, including one in the rural west-end community of Kinburn and two locations in the city's Westboro neighbourhood.

She's been in the business for three decades, but said the past 18 months have been incredibly stressful with the highest turnover of staff she has seen.

"The wait-list is still long, but unfortunately I just, I don't have the staff at this particular point to bring in the kids that need the care," Bolton said.

Her daycare centre on Churchill Avenue is currently operating on reduced hours, while the toddler program currently has only 10 children, instead of the maximum of 15.

'Nobody was applying'

She said she couldn't find early childhood educators (ECE) qualified to fill an open position.

"Nobody was applying and no one had credentials ... so we ended up having to go at a loss without five additional children. So it's been really tough. Both my other programs are struggling with the same deal as well," she said.

That has been extra tough, Bolton added, since toddler spaces bring in more revenue than preschool spaces.

A study released in June by Statistics Canada found employment among child-care workers was 21 per cent lower in February 2021 than it was before the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020.

At the time, economists and others working in child-care predicted many of those employees who left or were laid off would not return to the sector.

A 'perfect storm'

The staffing struggle is being felt by daycare centres across the province, according to Kristine Berg, executive director of a child-care staffing agency in Ottawa.

She said the pandemic was the Ontario child-care sector's "perfect storm," highlighting staffing issues that already existed.

"We're always having that revolving door making sure that we meet the ratios and we place quality individuals in the child-care sector," Berg said.

She attributes the latest staffing shortage in the child-care sector to many different factors. They include staff who continue to rely on government benefits, people who are nervous to work with unvaccinated children, and COVID-19 vaccines becoming mandatory.

"The demand [for ECEs] has definitely increased for sure. It's a good time to be a staffing agency, we are getting a lot of new customers and we are happy to help," Berg said.

ECE burnout

Tamara Brown, director of Brown Bear Day Care in the west-end community of Stittsville, said some of her staff are reporting burnout after months of working with babies and toddlers while wearing personal protective equipment (PPE).

She said many ECEs are also trying to take care of their own children who are dealing with COVID-19 cases at their schools or daycares.

"The hope that this is going to be over is kind of waning, as well, which is tough," Brown said.

ECEs who work in daycares make between \$16 and 20 per hour, which is set by individual daycare providers, but the funding comes from the province and is funnelled through municipalities.

To entice more workers to stay or enter the profession, Brown wants the provincial government to consider a higher wage enhancement for ECEs than the extra \$2 per hour introduced by the Liberals in 2014.

"Without early educators, people can't work. So I mean, that's a big spoke in the community's economy," she said.

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