

Alberta child-care centres need COVID-19 supports like schools, operator says ^[1]

Child-care centres could use financial assistance to help cover overtime costs, says YMCA spokesperson

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Source: CBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 3 Jan 2022

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Some child-care operators and parents say Alberta's youngest citizens have become an afterthought in the province's management of the COVID-19 pandemic.

And with the Omicron variant now reportedly spread widely, some parents are contemplating keeping their preschool-age children home.

Last week, Alberta Education Minister Adriana LaGrange promised medical-grade masks and rapid testing kits to school-age children and teens after they return to class Jan. 10.

Michelle Hynes-Dawson, vice-president of community and digital engagement for the YMCA of Northern Alberta, says child-care organizations are missing out on some of the infection control tools afforded to schools.

"If supports are being given to schools, really consider whether child care could benefit from those supports as well," Hynes-Dawson said.

Children younger than five are ineligible to be vaccinated.

Hynes-Dawson said child-care centres could also use provincial financial assistance to help cover some of the overtime costs of dealing with staff shortages.

Finding qualified early childhood educators was difficult before the pandemic, she said.

If more staff become ill with the Omicron variant or have to isolate due to exposures, some of the YMCA's 56 child-care programs will have to temporarily close, she said.

Daycares, like schools, are also losing a source of information.

The Alberta government's list of known COVID-19 outbreaks, last updated Dec. 21, lists 11 child-care and out-of-school programs as having outbreaks.

On Dec. 31, Alberta Health Services (AHS) paused contact notification and case investigation in daycares and schools.

"We are currently facing a variant that is so infectious, and spreads so quickly, that individual case and contact management will not be effective," AHS spokesman Bruce Conway said in an email Monday.

Last Friday, Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Alberta's chief medical officer of health, said it was no longer necessary to "document the majority of cases in order to have an effective surveillance system."

"We will continue to watch all of our metrics to help get a well-rounded view of Omicron in the coming days and weeks," she told a press conference.

It leaves daycares reliant on staff and children's caregivers to disclose any positive COVID-19 test results.

Hynes-Dawson said YMCA daycares had already abandoned reliance on AHS notices because they were too slow.

Centres were aiming to share information within a day, she said.

Parents see blind spots for little ones in the pandemic

The situation has left some parents feeling uneasy about sending their young children to daycare during this fifth wave.

"I really feel like kids under five in daycares who aren't in schools are very forgotten in the larger conversation about how we're managing COVID risk," said Lauren Albrecht, whose daughter is three.

Albrecht and her husband both work full time. Their daughter has been going to a daycare centre since they reopened during the summer

of 2020.

With no daily updates during the holidays, and estimates showing a rapid spread of Omicron, Albrecht doesn't feel like she has the information she needs to make an informed choice right now.

Toddlers and preschoolers are too young to keep masks affixed all day, she said. She's worried about the potential long-term health effects of COVID-19, should her child get infected.

"We kind of throw them in when we talk about a pandemic of the unvaccinated," Albrecht said. "I'm just not willing to gamble that they'll be fine without a vaccine and it's ok for them to be infected."

She'd like to see a rapid testing program run through daycares, improvements to ventilation in centres, and better masks distributed to child-care workers. Sick pay would also help workers keep infectious kids at home, she said.

Edmonton parent Matt Grier said his family is also weighing their options.

With his six-year-old daughter out of school for the week, he opted to keep his toddler out of daycare on Monday. The idea of sending him back is "nerve-racking," he said.

Grier said it "seems crazy" for the province to halt contact tracing in daycares and schools.

"I feel like we're really lucky because we can both work from home, and so we can both juggle," he said. "I really feel for the people whose jobs require them to be there."

In 2020, the federal and provincial governments gave the child-care sector a combined \$87 million through relief grants and safe restart agreements.

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