

N.S. daycares remain open, but grapple with staffing challenges ^[1]

'We definitely need to continue to be able to run our businesses in order to support families'

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EXCERPTS

Nova Scotia daycare operators say they are committed to staying open through the current Omicron wave of the pandemic, but are grappling with the same staffing challenges as other employers.

"All workforces are struggling," said Lee Anne Eveline, the director of early learning and child-care programs at the Nova Scotia College of Early Childhood Educators.

Eveline remains optimistic daycares will be able to stay open despite the staffing challenges created by COVID-19 infections, plus the isolation periods related to possible exposures.

"We definitely need to continue to be able to run our businesses in order to support families ... and if families are able to work then that helps keep the economy going," Eveline said.

Closures hard on working parents

The executive director of the Halifax YWCA, Miia Suokonautio, agrees. The YWCA runs two large daycare centres, and helps manage roughly 40 home daycares that together provide care for 600 children in the Halifax area.

Many of them are from lower-income families who receive provincial subsidies for their daycare spaces.

Suokonautio notes daycare closures disproportionately affect parents with jobs that can't be done from home.

"We're very, very cognizant of the fact that closure should be our very last option, because of the extraordinarily adverse impact that it has on everybody involved," she said.

Suokonautio said uncertainty around COVID-19 is already making it difficult to schedule time off for employees, exacerbating an existing problem of a lack of qualified backfill staff.

"Smaller family home daycares, they're extremely vulnerable because they don't have any backup, and they tend to be one-person shops. So if that one family home daycare provider is ill or exposed, that centre won't be able to operate at all," she said.

P.E.I. will allow close contacts to keep working

On Dec. 30, the government of Prince Edward Island debuted a "test-to-stay" policy for essential workers, although it said it will be used "very sparingly." The protocol allows those who are close contacts but don't have COVID-19 symptoms to undergo regular testing so they can continue working.

P.E.I. has stipulated that essential workers under the "test-to-stay" program must isolate when they are not at work.

"This policy is not without risk and will be used very sparingly," according to a statement from P.E.I. Health and Wellness.

Nova Scotia Health Department spokesperson Marla McInnis said a "test-to-stay" program for daycares is unwise in this province, given the current prevalence of COVID-19.

"We have to use our testing resources carefully," she said in an email. "Workplaces that are currently receiving rapid tests are those that serve populations that are at the greatest risk for severe outcomes from COVID-19."

Meanwhile, MacInnis said the primary use of rapid tests is for members of the public who have symptoms or are close contacts of known COVID-19 cases.

Suokonautio of the Halifax YWCA said she never liked the sound of the "test-to-stay" protocol.

"This would be a bit tricky as the messaging is, 'You're well enough to work but not well enough to be out in community.' Implementing this type of messaging would be super hard," she said.

Financial support

The Nova Scotia government provided financial support during earlier pandemic lockdowns when daycares were closed by order of Public Health.

Those payments ended in September, and the Nova Scotia Department of Education is currently recommending all daycares remain open.

However, Education Department spokesperson Jenna MacQueen said in an email more financial support is possible if a daycare has to close.

"The department has continued to support child-care centres throughout the pandemic, that may include financial support in the event that a child-care centre is required to close by public health," she said.

Eveline, with the Nova Scotia College of Early Childhood Educators, said the government could support the sector by managing a temporary program to increase the pool of available early childhood educators (ECEs) to respond to acute staffing shortages.

"We must have Level 2 or Level 3 classified ECEs working in our child-care centres. That is the protocol that we must follow," she said.

"If we were able to appropriately vet a person who was a Level 1 to come and work for us, then that would be something that would help if we were in that position."

Paid sick leave

Suokonautio said she'd like to see the provincial government fund sick days for all daycare workers, especially in smaller businesses.

"Preferable would be to allow staff to be home on paid sick leave if they're close contacts or symptomatic," she said. "Yes, this would cause staffing challenges but if the end game is to prevent further spread and illness, then this seems reasonable."

The Nova Scotia government said last month it will bring back a paid sick leave program. It is expected to launch Monday and will run for two months. Those who must take time off work due to COVID-19 could be eligible for up to four paid sick days. More details are expected to be released this week.

Region: Nova Scotia ^[3]

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