

# Childcare centre director says province isn't doing enough to keep staff and children safe <sup>[1]</sup>

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Source: CityNews

Format: Article

Publication Date: 18 Jan 2022

## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS



The executive director of a Toronto daycare centre is speaking out, saying the Ministry of Education is not doing enough to keep child care staff and children safe.

Executive director of Treetop Children's Centre, Amy O'Neil, says while the focus has been on getting kids back to school over the last two weeks, child care centres have been ignored.

"It's a very frustrating experience to be an operator during this endemic. We're constantly an afterthought. We feel very devalued and ignored," said O'Neil. "We're working with unmasked and unvaccinated children who need protection and our staff need protection."

At this point, they have only received enough N95 masks for their staff for seven days at one each per day.

O'Neil said she is supposed to receive only one HEPA filter for two classrooms and it has not yet been delivered. "I will then have to decide which room to put it in, which doesn't make any sense," said O'Neil.

The Ontario government is requiring all that schools and child care spaces without mechanical ventilation must have a HEPA filter.

The province also promised two rapid antigen tests for every secondary school student, elementary school student, child in child care and staff members for use when someone is symptomatic.

O'Neil says they have not received any tests either.

"We have no understanding of when the HEPA filters will come, when the rapid antigen test will come or how and when we can reorder other masks," added O'Neil.

"We're always left wondering, 'When will we receive it? Will we receive it? Is this true? Will they follow through?' We never have consistent messaging that the ministry will follow through on what they say they will do with childcare."

The City of Toronto announced Tuesday it would be distributing rapid antigen tests to child care centres, but this does not include ones located in schools as they are expected to receive them from the school board. Treetop Children's Centre is located inside Oriole Park Junior Public School so they do not qualify.

O'Neil is also the chair of the Toronto Community for Better Childcare and says she has heard from multiple other operators who are facing similar challenges.

"Either they haven't received their N95 masks, or they've only received enough for a few days ... This is a childcare wide problem," said O'Neil. "The ministry and the policy and decision makers need to listen to our voices in order to understand exactly what it is that we need to operate safely.

O'Neil said the concern also extends to parents who she says have started pulling their children out of childcare. "I've had at least half a dozen parents pull their children out of care because of fears around lack of N95 masks, lack of HEPA filters, lack of rapid antigen testing, and also lack of eligibility for PCR testing."

She said she had started to look at procuring their own quantity of N95 masks, but says they have been impossible to find.

"Either we can't find them or they're too costly. We are a nonprofit community based organization. We don't have a lot of extra funds to be paying out of pocket for PPE," said O'Neil.

The Minister of Education's office tells CityNews what has been shipped out already is either the actual order placed by the school board or child care centre or the monthly average order of surgical/procedural masks plus a 25 per cent margin.

"An ongoing and steady supply of N95s is being provided on a regular basis to education and child care staff to protect staff, children and communities," said a spokesperson for Minister Stephen Lecce.

Since the emergence of the Omicron variant and it's high transmissibility, experts have urged the use N95 masks in public settings versus other types of masks, adding it's critical for personal protection.

CityNews has acquired a memo from the Ministry of Education to staff members and schools that says education staff should receive one non-fit-tested N95 each day.

They also said the mask should be replaced with a medical mask if the filtering part of the mask becomes wet, when the mask has lost some of its integrity, either relaxed elastic or a damaged filtering part and when there were potentially infectious droplets splashing onto the mask.

The Ministry also recommends teachers switch to a medical mask outdoors in order to protect the longevity of each mask.

Meanwhile, the TDSB says they have 600,000 N95 masks for staff and each staff member will receive one non-fit-tested mask per day, in addition to other medical masks.

CityNews has asked the TDSB how long 600,000 masks are expected to last them, but have not received a response.

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** health and safety <sup>[4]</sup>

government <sup>[5]</sup>

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/22/01/childcare-centre-director-says-province-isnt-doing-enough-keep-staff> [2]

<https://toronto.citynews.ca/2022/01/18/child-care-centres-masks-filters-ontario-covid19/> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7856> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/health-and-safety> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8941>