

Families and advocates calling for more support in childcare sector^[1]

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EXCERPTS

COVID-19 continues to be a challenge for childcare centres in the province.

Many facilities say they're overwhelmed with cases spreading among staff and children. Now families and advocates are calling on the province to provide more support and resources for a sector they believe is being ignored.

Kirstin Valcourt has had to work from home for the majority of January.

Her 20-month-old son is in childcare, and over the past month she's had to self-isolate for ten days on three separate occasions after being in close contact with a COVID case.

She said it takes a toll on working families.

"We're living in an environment nowadays where it's two working parents, it's both mom and dad that are working, and they can't be taking off ten days at a time," said Valcourt.

Valcourt isn't the only one feeling the strain COVID is putting on the childcare system.

The Manitoba and Child Care Association (MCCA) said facilities are overwhelmed right now with an influx of Omicron cases among children and staff.

Executive Director, Jodie Kehl is calling on the province to provide clear guidelines for childcare centres in the province.

"There is a lot of inconsistencies right now between both childcare and education, but also just between childcare programs themselves, and that's really concerning, it's really frustrating for families," said Kehl.

Kehl said government funding for short-staffed centres can be difficult to qualify for, leaving many centres with no choice but to charge families whose children aren't able to access the programming while isolating.

"I think we need to remove any barriers for facilities right now that are trying to stay operational."

Earlier this month, assistant professor of Microbiology and Statistics at the University of Manitoba, Aleeza Gerstein started collecting survey data from more than 300 childcare centres to get some clarification as to how many cases were in the sector.

"Twenty-five per cent of the facilities that answered our survey had either one cohort, multiple cohorts, or the entire facility closed because either there were so many positive infections, or enough staff were infected or isolating that they didn't have enough staff to keep the facility open," said Gerstein.

In a statement to CTV News, a spokesperson for the province said:

"Early Learning and Child Care service providers continue to be prioritized to receive test kits for the purpose of testing designated, unvaccinated staff, volunteers, students and contractors. Additionally, eligibility criteria has been expanded to include symptomatic staff, both vaccinated and unvaccinated. The use of rapid antigen tests will help in limiting the risk of transmission of COVID-19 when adults are working in close proximity to children."

But Gerstein said the government needs to do more, like giving the sector unrestricted access to rapid tests.

"(The sector needs) N95 masks, rapid tests, grants for increased ventilation, and the they need better communication. They need a phone number that they can call to get clarification on what the guidelines should be," said Gerstein. "This is all doable, this could be done today."

Gerstein is continuing to collect survey data every week.

Valcourt also hopes to see more done.

“There needs to be more government support for rapid tests, they should have the N95 masks, that should be taken care of.”

The province said the needs of the childcare workforce are continually being evaluated based on public health guidance and formal discussions.

The MCCA said it’s working on getting more guideline clarification this week.

Region: Manitoba ^[3]

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