

Parents feel caught in middle of NWT childcare subsidy dispute ^[1]

As a number of daycares and day homes protest the NWT government's rollout of a federal childcare subsidy, some parents involved feel caught in the crossfire.

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EXCERPTS

The NWT Early Childhood Association and a group of day homes have each published letters objecting in strong terms to what they say is a flawed, unethical introduction of the subsidy.

As a condition of signing up for the subsidy, the GNWT will have the final say over each provider's annual fee increases. Three days before an initial deadline to opt in, the territorial government made accessing any territorial funding contingent on signing up for the federal subsidy.

While some childcare providers say that's equivalent to coercion and a poorly designed program is being rushed through, the territorial government says it is trying to get money into the pockets of parents. The subsidy is intended to halve the average daily childcare fee this year and, by 2026, the NWT hopes to reach the federal goal of \$10-a-day care. Only providers who opt in can pass along that discount to families.

In a strongly worded statement last week, the NWT's Department of Education, Culture and Employment said it had "been informed of some concerning practices by day homes, including families feeling pressured to consent to retroactive fee increases and in some cases being denied care when refusing to consent."

One parent subsequently provided documents showing their day home had recently proposed a fee increase of between 20 and 30 percent. In that instance, parents were given less than a week to decide whether to accept the change.

The parent asked for anonymity – for both themselves and the day home – in discussing that request, as did others interviewed for this report. With childcare a difficult service to secure in many NWT communities, families say they are afraid of poisoning relations with operators.

"My goal is not to victimize them at all, rather tell our side of the story," the parent said by email. They said they had chosen to share the documents after the NWT Early Childhood Association last week stated it "would have a hard time finding a program that has raised their fees in the past two years," let alone by almost 30 percent.

"This is the proof that it is, in fact, happening – and happened in overnight fashion," the parent wrote.

"ECE has been upfront and answered all questions that we've had and, when faced with questions they didn't have answers to at the moment, they got back to us almost immediately with the answer. We also supported a rate increase by our day home provider."

However, the parent said, the large monthly increase requested by the family's provider was "insulting to ask of parents" and meant having to find more than an additional \$500 per month for the rest of the year.

Professional standards

Another parent, a mother in Yellowknife whose child attends a separate provider, described hearing a succession of similar complaints.

"At my daycare, it had been very smooth. She had mentioned things were confusing and it wasn't super-clear, but she had been keeping up to date and it never seemed like a question that she was going to opt in," the second parent said.

"But I went out for dinner with five or six other parents toward the end of March and realized my situation seemed really different than everyone else's.

"Every single person at the dinner had had their day home operator announce their fees were going up. They were going to pick up their kids and the operator was like, 'By the way, prices are going up \$300 next month.'

"That's wild to me. I have so much respect for day home operators. They do an incredibly hard job. I have trouble believing five or six day homes had all been planning, already, to increase their prices by 20 percent, and they all happened to announce it that same week."

ECE has said the maximum increase permitted this year, for any operator opting in to the federal subsidy program, is 2.3 percent.

In documents seen by Cabin Radio, multiple day home operators told families that increases well beyond that cap were needed as fees had not risen in many years.

Patricia Davison, representing the NWT Early Childhood Association, said she had sympathy for parents who felt like providers were taking advantage of the subsidy's introduction and applying unfair pressure. (In one instance, a family described losing their place at a day home after objecting to a proposed fee increase.)

"I am sorry families were put in that situation," Davison said.

"I would encourage the families to reach out to the association. There are so many compassionate providers out there, maybe we can assist somehow.

"We have resources for providers and are developing and accumulating resources for families. One of our goals is to set professional standards – this is to benefit families, children and the ECE sector in general."

Yvette Cooper, the operator of a Yellowknife day home and a critic of ECE's approach to the subsidy, argued that requests for large fee increases were emblematic of childcare providers struggling with high costs and "confused by ECE continually moving the goalposts around the field."

"Parents absolutely need to pay less and the government should take care of that," said Cooper by email. "They also need to provide a living wage to the front-line workers who actually provide the care. They need to do both, you can't have one without the other."

After this report was first published, Cooper provided an email sent by ECE to operators on March 24. In that email, operators were told any daycare or day home wishing to exceed the 2.3-percent cap would have to have all families agree and "pay the additional increase prior to the end of March 2022 in order for the rate to be used to calculate subsidy entitlements for 2022-2023."

Cooper said that email from ECE explains why multiple providers raised rates at the same time.

'No say'

Three more Yellowknife parents interviewed for this article each described situations in which operators had been, in one parent's words, "very upfront" in requesting fee increases before ECE's introduction of a cap.

One of the three said they worried for their day home's future and had hoped federal funding would bring stability, but expressed concern at the apparent conflict that had arisen.

That parent said they understood the disruption caused by an attempt to move operators in different financial situations into a system that applies the same provisions and fee structure to all.

The Yellowknife mother said the situation was "just stressful."

"You don't have a say. You can't say 'I'm not going to bring my child,' because there's no childcare in town. You feel like you have to agree to whatever they're saying because they take care of your child. You do respect them and you want to make it work," the parent said.

"I feel like the GNWT has somehow ended up being enemies with day home providers. It's so unfortunate and we're caught in the middle of it.

"We all thought \$10 a day was going to be incredible and now it's like we're at war."

Region: Northwest Territories ^[3]

Tags: child care subsidies ^[4]

\$10-a-day child care ^[5]

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