

N.W.T. gov't to re-evaluate child-care subsidy after operator outcry ^[1]

Re-evaluated plan to be communicated better, says minister of education

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EXCERPTS

The N.W.T.'s minister of education, culture and employment says his department is re-evaluating how child-care subsidies work in the Northwest Territories. This comes after day home and daycare operators said they were blindsided by changes in government messaging and a subsidy cap that makes it harder to earn a living wage.

The territory signed on to the federal government's child-care deal in December. It aims to cut child-care fees in half and, in five years, reduce the average cost of child care to \$10 a day.

As the plan has rolled out in recent weeks, however, operators say the territorial government changed its tune about how the funding would work.

First, they were told funding from both levels of government were not linked. Then, they were told that they wouldn't receive territorial funding if they did not opt into the federal Child Care Reduction Fee (CCRF).

Yvette Cooper runs a day home in Yellowknife and said she felt "tricked."

Not all operators want to sign on to the CCRF, because it bars child-care operators from raising rates by more than 2.3 per cent this fiscal year. Cooper said that restriction was also a surprise, and the information wasn't clear until operators were facing the subsidy deadline on April 15.

"I think they have misled us and manipulated us. We obviously have lost a lot of trust."

ECE told CBC News, in an email, that four day home operators have closed their doors since the subsidies rolled out.

Lack of communication caused confusion

Cooper said there had been several months of meetings between government and child-care providers to collect feedback leading up to the funding announcement. In February, she said all the licensed providers received an email saying an announcement was coming and asking operators to not raise fees.

After that email, operators heard nothing until the changes were announced to the public last month. That generated confusion about how subsidies were being rolled out and how reduced rates would be made available to families.

Cooper said she found out the plan had been announced from parents who came to her business, and asked if they should start paying her half her rate the next day.

The NWT Early Childhood Association — a non-profit formed in February to advocate for early childhood education — said in a statement earlier this month that "Minister Simpson and ECE (The Department of Education, Culture and Employment) is pushing providers to their breaking point."

The association said providers were "taken aback" when they learned territorial and federal funding would be linked, and said it was a "direct contradiction" to what they'd been told by the department before: that the new CCRF wouldn't affect their core funding arrangements. The association also said the information came "just days" before the deadline to opt in.

'Last straw' for some providers

Patricia Davison, who is on the associations' board of directors, said without being able to raise their fees, child-care staff will struggle to earn a living wage.

"With [Yellowknife] having currently something like a 6.9 [per cent] cost of living increase, the 2.3 fee increase the [territory] is allowing does not help programs of any kind stay afloat," she told CBC News in an email.

She said the child-care sector already faces challenges with recruiting and retaining staff and "this might be the last straw for some providers."

For Kristie Vyse it was.

Vyse operates a day home in Fort Smith but after 11 years is closing her doors on May 5 because of the changes.

The confusion and changes were causing so much stress and anxiety that "for my own health I need to step back," she said. She said parents were coming to her with questions she didn't have the answers for.

"It was like the lack of transparency and communication with ECE. Information was being put out to the media before it was being given to the programs," she said.

"They're saying one thing, a week later they're changing it. It's just going back and forth, back and forth."

Vyse is transitioning to a job with the municipal daycare but said she feels for parents looking to provide their children with the best care. Some families had been on her wait list for up to two years, she said, and the town's daycare also has a long wait list.

Minister agrees communication needs improvement

Simpson said the government has been "learning a lot over the past few weeks," and that ECE will "re-evaluate" its plans.

He said he'd be meeting with his department this week to find out what they've been hearing on the "front lines" and to figure out how core issues could be best addressed. Eventually they'd work with the federal government to adjust, he said.

Moving forward, Simpson said the biggest change will be on how ECE communicates its plan.

He admits that in the rush to meet fiscal deadlines for the federal funding messaging was confusing.

"I get that this program was rolled out very quickly and people felt like they didn't have the information they needed," Simpson said. "So ensuring that everyone knows the reality of the situation is going to be very important."

He said the department would also address concerns with the 2.3 per cent cap by looking at new funding streams.

Simpson said it's too soon to say how, exactly, changes will roll out.

He said that "things are moving quickly," and child-care providers can expect changes this year.

Region: Northwest Territories ^[3]

Tags: child care subsidies ^[4]

child care operators ^[5]

home child care ^[6]

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