

County receiving \$8.75 million from federal-provincial child care agreement ^[1]

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Author: Snobelen, Jordan

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EXCERPTS

GUELPH – The Wellington County Children’s Early Years Division is receiving \$8.75 million in 2022 from the Ministry of Education as part of a recently announced federal-provincial agreement to reduce child care fees to an average of \$10 per day by 2026.

“That is money we will need to be putting out the door by the end of December,” said early years division director Luisa Artuso, revealing the allotment amount during an April 20 social services committee meeting.

Announced by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on March 28, \$13.2 billion, made up mostly of federal taxpayer dollars, is to be spent across a four-year period in Ontario, supplementing licensed child care operator fees so parents of children aged five and under are gradually spending less on child care.

The feds says fees in the province may be halved by the end of the year.

Child care rates for infants to preschoolers – the age range affected by the national child care agreement – is currently between \$1,000 per month on the low end for preschoolers, and \$1,375 per month at the high end for infants, according to early years division data.

An initial fee reduction of 25 per cent kicked in this month, with rebates (retroactive to April 1) said to be coming to parents in May.

But that may not be the case, according to Artuso, who said the county won’t be receiving its allotment until May.

“It is unlikely that families will start to get reimbursed in May,” Artuso said by phone on April 21, explaining there’s still much administrative work required by the province in determining who gets what of the county’s allotment.

“We would love to do this in May, and maybe June is a bit optimistic, but we will be working very hard and very quickly on this.”

At the committee meeting, Artuso ran through a long list of responsibilities the division has as the province’s municipal service administrator for child care in the county and Guelph.

Eligibility criteria still needs to be understood, child care operators who want to opt in to the program need to be assessed, accountability and reporting processes hashed out, and finally purchase-of-service agreements need to be entered and finalized with operators.

“It is a significant amount of work that we need to undertake, and as quickly as possible,” Artuso said.

Between now and a September deadline for operators to decide on whether they want to opt in or not, the province expects to enrol 5,500 licensed child care centres and 139 home child care agencies in the program.

It’s too early for Artuso to say how many new agreements the county will enter into, but there could be as many as 45, representing 84 child care sites (some operators have more than one site).

For those who are opting in, parent fees had to be frozen as of March 27 while things are sorted out, which has left some operators wondering what they’ll end up getting out of the deal.

Artuso previously told the Advertiser some operators are opting in right away, while others are holding out until they find out what exactly they’re opting in to.

“We have an operators meeting [April 22] where we’re going to be going over everything with all the operators to help inform them of the process, their requirements and answering any of their questions,” Artuso said.

Provincial guidelines for the program were received by the county on April 12, and many questions have come up since, Artuso said, adding the province did not consult with the county in developing its guidelines.

“They’re actually reviewing some of the guidelines as we speak, so things may change over the next little while,” Artuso told the committee.

Once the province provides clarity, Artuso will present a fulsome report to the committee — she's anticipating in June.

"We're going to need to start entering into agreements over the summer ... we need to expedite this as quickly as possible and get the funding to the operators so that they can pass on the rebate to families," Artuso said.

Federal dollars are also being used to support an additional 86,000 licensed early learning and child care spaces by the end of 2026 (little has been explained about how that goal will be realized) along with wage increases for early childhood educators supporting children aged five and under.

The county is responsible for spreading the federal dollars out to accommodate the wage bump as well.

Taking everything into account, "It's doubling the work that we're doing right now," Artuso said.

To help shoulder the increased administrative workload, the division seeks to bring in extra staff using funds provided as part of the federal-provincial agreement.

There are currently 12- and 23-month positions open for data analysts to sift through all the financials needed before money can get out the door.

The province requires frequent reporting on how funding is being used, and by fall the early years division will have a better handle on how the allotment does or doesn't meet the county's needs.

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