

Ontario parents and daycare operators confused about when fees will drop ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ontario parents who are hoping to see their daycare fees drop in May, as the province said they would, might have to wait until the fall to realize any savings – a consequence, critics say, of Ontario waiting so long to sign the \$10-a-day federal child-care program.

By the time Ontario announced the \$13.2-billion, six-year subsidy deal on March 28, every other province and territory had already done so, and most of them had reduced fees by at least 25 per cent, retroactive to Jan. 1. Ontario said that rebates of up to 25 per cent would begin being issued in May.

That was an ambitious pledge, given that child-care centres needed time to apply for the program and that millions of dollars needed to be transferred from the federal government to the province and then into the hands of daycare operators.

Now that parents' expectations are being dashed, frustration is setting in.

"I'm furious at the provincial government," says Christie Cowan, a registered nurse and mother of three who lives in Ottawa. Saving 25 per cent of her child-care bill would put \$300 a month in her pocket. "That's my water bill, my hydro bill and groceries. There are so many other things I could be doing with that money."

An e-mail she received a few weeks ago from her child-care centre said it still in the dark about the program.

"They've had no guidelines on how to get their money for it," Ms. Cowan says.

All of the approximately 5,000 licensed child-care centres in Ontario will be eligible for the program. The deadline for operators to apply is Sept. 1, which means some may wait until the end of summer and won't be seeing rebates until at least then.

As things stand, centres are waiting to see details of what participation in the program will require. The good news for parents is that the province has promised that rebates will be retroactive to April 1, meaning the savings are coming – it's just a question of when.

"There's a lot of confusion," says Carolyn Ferns, public policy and government relations co-ordinator for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. "Parents have been told they're going to be getting their fees lowered in May, but yet child-care centres don't know what the process is or how to make that decision."

The wait for fees to drop, and the frustrations around it, are a direct result of the province waiting until the final hour to sign the federal deal, Ms. Ferns says.

"Other provinces are already seeing reductions for families, they're already working on expanding spaces, and here in Ontario we're way behind," she says.

Funding guidelines, which will help child-care centres answer crucial questions in deciding whether to opt in have yet to be made public, says Andrea Hannen, executive director of the Association of Day Care Operators of Ontario. These include questions such as, what do operators need to do to apply? How is the funding going to flow to them? What are the reporting requirements?

"Until that comes out and operators can kind of understand how their municipalities are going to administer these funds, nobody can really sign up until that happens," she says. "Everyone is in wait-and-see mode."

Kara Pihlak, executive director of the Oak Park Co-operative Children's Centre in London, Ont., has been fielding questions from parents about when fees are going down.

"Parents ask about it and I say I don't have details yet," she says.

Her centre will "definitely sign on" to the program, but for now, nothing has really changed.

"My understanding is that the funding hasn't even flowed yet to the cities, so right now we're status quo."

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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