

Ontario parents could wait months for savings due to delayed child-care deal, advocates say ^[1]

Parents still waiting for the promised 25% reduction in child-care fees

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EXCERPTS

Ontario parents might have to wait months longer than they expected for the discounts and rebates the province promised when it signed the national child-care deal with the Trudeau government in March — as municipalities scramble to implement the required guidelines for local daycare programs.

Jennifer Kotler, a mother of a one-year-old and a two-year-old, says her Toronto daycare hopes to enrol in the program, but she's been told it hasn't been given that option yet. She says she's frustrated the province didn't sign the deal earlier so she could start saving some of the \$3,300 a month her family budgets for child care alone.

"It was really frustrating to know that the average person who needs child care could have been helped so much sooner," said Kotler, "and for what I assume are kind of political reasons, that didn't end up happening."

Ontario was the last province to sign onto the federal \$10-a-day child-care program, the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care agreement, on Mar. 28. But the provincial government announced it would make early daycare fees cheaper by 25 per cent retroactive to April, and give the rebates starting in May. Experts say that was never realistic given the tight timelines and the delay has left parents like Kotler wondering when they'll see those savings.

Kotler says parents and daycares are stuck looking on as other provinces like Saskatchewan have started rolling out the discounted rates and refunds they pledged when they started signing onto the plan last summer.

"The whole year previously, we could have been saving money and having more affordable child care," Kotler said.

Kotler is not alone in her frustration. The opposition parties at Queen's Park and some child-care advocates also accused Doug Ford's Progressive Conservative government of delaying the signing for political reasons.

In January, Education Minister Stephen Lecce responded by saying Ontario was working to get a deal that the province considers fiscally sustainable and fair for families, but that the federal government wasn't offering enough money, among other things.

"We're at the table and we have been for months with the federal government, urging them for a longer term investment, an increased investment and more flexibility to support all families in how they raise their children," Lecce said at the time.

Families 'in limbo,' expert says

Expecting municipalities and daycares to get a system operating days after Ontario signed the agreement wasn't realistic, Carolyn Ferns, the public policy coordinator for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, told CBC's Metro Morning.

"The ink was barely dry on the agreement," Ferns said.

Municipalities need their child-care programs approved by city councils — which can take weeks, depending on when councils meet and what they decide, says Ferns. And daycare operators need time to review the program once they're given the go-ahead to apply.

"They want parents to see these discounts, but ... they have to see the details of it before they sign on the dotted line," she said.

Daycares are feeling the immediate impact as they field calls from confused parents wondering where their savings are, says Amy O'Neil, the director of TreeTop Children's Centre, a non-profit daycare operator in Toronto.

"Families are really getting discouraged and upset," she said.

O'Neil says parents will eventually get the rebates and discounts. The long-term problem is the lack of detail on how Ontario will expand child-care access by 86,000 spaces over the next five years.

"It doesn't address certain things like workforce challenges, it doesn't put into place other supports for child-care staff and child-care operators. So there are parts of this plan that are not ideal, in as much as we know so far," she said.

Rebates should come by fall at the earliest

For parents to receive their cheques, money has to flow from the federal government to the province, which then has to pass the funds on to municipal governments that oversee the daycares, which will then allocate the funds to the centres that choose to participate.

Since signing onto the deal, the province announced it would work with municipalities to enrol more than 5,000 licensed child-care centres, and home child-care agencies that serve children up to five years of age.

An email statement from the Ministry of Education says it gave municipalities "full technical briefings" within days of signing the federal-provincial agreement, and released at least three months worth of funding and supports for municipalities to start enrolling daycare centres as early as April 19.

However, municipalities say they're still reviewing the provincial guidelines on how cities are to enrol daycares and structure their programs. City of Toronto officials say they didn't get those guidelines until the end of April.

"The city must develop processes in order to implement this new program, communicate to over 1,000 child-care operators and home child-care agencies, and process applications of participating operators," said Shanley McNamee, the general manager of City of Toronto Children's Services.

Ferns says parents shouldn't realistically expect their rebates until at least September and as late as December, when rates are supposed to be reduced by another 25 per cent.

"When child-care advocates were saying pretty much every day that the Ontario government should sign on to this plan and they should do it quickly, this is why."

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: \$10 a day ^[4]

child care fees ^[5]

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