

# The Ontario government said child care rebates would start in May. In the GTA, most municipalities haven't even begun accepting applications yet <sup>[1]</sup>

Author: Fox, Chris

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## EXCERPTS

Ontario parents were told that they would start receiving child care rebates in May, but only one municipality in the Greater Toronto Area has even begun to accept applications from centres at this point and it says it could still be weeks until the money actually starts flowing.

When the Ontario government inked a deal with the feds to bring \$10 a day child care to the province in March, it promised that fees would be reduced by 25 per cent as of April 1 and that parents would start receiving rebate cheques as soon as May.

But months later, many municipalities which are responsible for distributing the money allocated for the \$13.2 billion program haven't even begun to accept applications yet.

And, at least in the Greater Toronto Area, no centres have been formally approved to receive funding.

That means that not a single parent in the GTA has actually received a rebate yet.

"Doug Ford dithered and delayed and didn't sign that deal with the federal government in time and then misled Ontario families by telling them that he was going to get cheques out to them in May. It is pretty clear that parents are going to be lucky to see that cheque certainly before September," NDP MPP Marit Stiles, who was the party's education critic in the last provincial parliament, told CP24.com this week. "Many parents and families are feeling crushed, absolutely crushed by child care fees and they were hoping for some relief."

Ontario's agreement with the federal government is structured in such a way that it puts the onus on municipalities to enrol licensed centres and agencies into the new system and distribute money, which will then be used to reduce the fees being charged to parents – by 25 per cent as of April 1 of this year and by 50 per cent as of Jan. 1 of next year.

The problem is that most municipalities have had to scramble to create an application process for centres and to get information out to operators, likely pushing off financial relief for most parents into the summer and perhaps even as late as November.

That is because centres have until Sept. 1 to apply and then there is an allowance for an additional 60 days before fees are actually reduced.

The good news is that there could be some clarity coming for parents, if not actual financial relief.

Both York Region and Peel Region plan to open up applications this week, the latter doing so after a June 21 technical information session for operators.

The City of Toronto says it too will open up applications sometime "this month," but it has not yet announced a date. It is planning to hold a town hall for operators seeking information on June 22. Meanwhile, Halton Region is promising to open up applications "in the coming weeks," but it says they won't actually be reviewed until "late summer/early fall."

The only municipality in the GTA where childcare centres can currently apply is Durham Region – it opened its application portal on June 6. But officials there say that approvals will only begin in July after Durham Regional Council formally signs off on the program and that money will only be released "after approvals are complete and contracts (service agreements) are signed."

"I think parent expectations were pretty high that they would see lower fees quickly and that expectation was actually set by Premier Ford because when he signed the agreement he said that people would actually start to get rebates in May and that didn't happen," Carolyn Ferns, public policy and government relations co-ordinator for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, told CP24.com this week. "It is not that municipalities are being particularly slow or childcare providers are being particular slow, we know that in other provinces it took several months to get underway and the same thing is going to happen in Ontario. Municipalities have to change a lot about how they run childcare, how it is funded and how it works, set up this opt-in system and of course it is a requirement for them to get all this passed by their local council."

Ontario was the last province to sign onto the federal plan to lower child care fees for children aged five and under, doing so more than eight months after the first agreement was reached with British Columbia.

Shortly after signing the bilateral deal, the province released a detailed document with guidelines on how the program will work, but Ferns said that it was “written more for the municipalities to interpret” and then use to “set out the rules for centres.”

That, in turn, has created an information vacuum of sorts as centres wait for more information before making decisions on whether to apply.

“I think for sure most centres will opt in to this,” Ferns said. “But it is also a really big change, so it is totally understandable that they want to know exactly what this means for them and there are things in the funding guidelines that are open to interpretation. Something like a municipality being able to determine reasonable costs, that is a good thing but you know when you see that, you know, people want to know more.”

### 11 municipal service system managers have opened up applications

Ministry of Education officials speaking on background have said that the money to discount fees has already been distributed and that the program details “have been communicated to municipalities and operators for many weeks.”

They say that they have been “strongly encouraging” municipal partners to “work as quickly as possible with child care operators” to get that money “into parents’ pockets.”

So far, 11 consolidated municipal service system managers in Ontario have indeed opened up the enrollment process for licenced centres, according to the ministry.

The list includes the County of Simcoe, the County of Grey, the County of Bruce, the County of Renfrew, the County of Lambton, the City of Greater Sudbury, the District of Sault Ste. Marie Social Services Administration Board, the District of Timiskaming Social Services Administration Board, the Kenora District Services Board, the Manitoulin-Sudbury District Services Board and Durham Region.

The ministry also said that 13 more service system managers anticipate opening applications by the end of this month.

As an example of progress, the officials say that applications are now being processed from “every child care licensee” in the territory governed by the Manitoulin-Sudbury District Services Board.

“Over many months, our government remained focused on securing the best deal for Ontario families. We delivered a deal that cuts costs for families through billions in more funding, more child care spaces, and a longer agreement that protects parental choice,” a spokesperson for Education Minister Stephen Lecce said in a statement provided to CP24.com. “Altogether, Ontario parents will pay less for child care under our government with more options, benefits and supports for early years and child care services than anywhere else in the country. We’ll continue to do what it takes to help make life more affordable for working parents.”

Officials with the Ministry of Education have said that parents who are eligible for a refund will receive it directly from their licensed child care providers and don't need to apply.

But they caution that it is “now up to centres” to opt-in

Speaking with CP24.com, Ferns said that most will ultimately do so.

However, she said that she does have some concerns about the looming Sept. 1 deadline, which will leave most centres with only two months to apply.

“Those months are the summer months and this might seem like a minor point but for a non-profit child care centre, whose board of directors is made up of parent volunteers, they have to have board meetings to make these decisions and they don’t actually meet over the summer usually,” she said. “I think it is a lot on child care operators right now, especially on those small, non-profit boards. But they are all really committed to getting this done and I hope we see some flexibility with trying to get this to work.”

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** child care <sup>[4]</sup>

government <sup>[5]</sup>

fees <sup>[6]</sup>

Canada-wide agreement <sup>[7]</sup>

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