

Overnight daycare approved for Fort McMurray, Wood Buffalo ^[1]

'I feel fantastic. This is a long time waiting,' says Kyla Penner

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EXCERPTS

Wood Buffalo daycare centres may now offer overnight child care, after council unanimously approved amendments to the child care bylaw.

The Government of Alberta started allowing overnight child care in 2019, but the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo's bylaw did not permit it.

The amendments approved Tuesday removed the restriction on overnight care. The bylaw does not affect operators of unlicensed day homes, which are not regulated by the municipality and may already offer overnight care.

Kyla Penner, CEO of KP Squared Innovative Child Care, said she thinks the change will help get women back in the workforce.

"I feel fantastic. This is a long time waiting," Penner said.

She said she has met with representatives from the oilsands who told her companies were struggling to fill positions and that a lack of 24-hour child care is an issue.

As well, she said, Fort McMurray's hospital has struggled to fill permanent and casual positions because of the lack of overnight child care.

Penner has been working on opening a child-care facility in Fort McMurray for years, and her business model in other communities includes overnight child care.

More than 40 people are on her waiting list for overnight care.

Penner has been working with the province and the municipality since 2018 to try and get overnight daycare approved. She has been communicating with Fort McMurray's Keyano College to make sure there are enough trained staff.

She said her daycare centre, which is projected to open in September, will have individual rooms for kids staying in overnight care so they feel more at home.

Janet Huffman, board chair for Children First, said she doesn't support child-care centres operating overnight.

"If we could do everything we possibly can to keep a child in a home-like setting, that's where they need to be," she said.

She told council about issues facing the child-care industry, specifically the lack of qualified workers.

"I would love to see a council committee formed," Huffman said. She said the committee could talk about the challenges rural child care operators are facing and what can be done about them.

Huffman said recently a local centre offered a qualified educator a job, but the worker turned them down, saying she made more money working at the gas station.

"That's a sin," said Huffman.

Lyn Williams, who works in the day home industry but did not wish to speak on behalf of her employer, said she was also against the bylaw.

She predicts there will be problems that arise from children sleeping at daycare and remaining there too long.

"When the families pick [their children up], they're going to see then the behaviours, because the child has been away from their home for too long," said Williams.

Day homes, however, offer a more home-like setting, she said.

Williams said her employer offers overnight care, but there are 40 spaces available and only one is in use. She speculated that the price for overnight care is too high for most people to afford.

Though she doesn't hear many parents asking for overnight care, she said many ask about extended hours before 6 a.m. and after 6 p.m.

Region: Alberta ^[3]

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