

Many child care centres seeking more info on \$10-a-day program ^[1]

Local child care centres can start filling in the paperwork to opt in to the nationwide \$10-a-day program

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EXCERPTS:

Child care centres across Guelph and Wellington County have begun filling in the paperwork to opt into the nationwide \$10-a-day child care program.

A letter of intent went out in June, but the formal application process for local providers opened last week.

The general response from providers has been "very positive," according to Luisa Artuso, the director of children's early years division with the County of Wellington.

But even with positivity, comes hesitation for operators, both for-profit and not-for-profit.

As of last Friday, about 55 per cent of providers across Wellington County responded, and all but two providers said they intend to opt in.

Broken down, 61 per cent of providers outside of Guelph have responded. Fifty-five per cent of providers in Guelph notified officials of their intent.

"It will be a benefit to families, in general, for children that are under school age. It creates equity for all families," said Kim Campbell, a supervisor at the not-for-profit Noah's Ark Childcare in Guelph, who are going through the process of filling in the paperwork to opt in.

The process itself, she admits, is lengthy but while she doesn't have any concerns at the moment, notes it's all so new.

"It's going to be a working and evolutionary piece that we're working through with the county and the ministry to make it work," Campbell said.

The county admits there is some hesitation from some service providers, who are wanting more information.

"I would say 90 per cent of the programs (who haven't decided) were more waiting for more information before they made a commitment," Artuso said.

That's the sentiment from not-for-profit Parkview Day Care in Guelph, who feel it's a big decision, but one they won't be in a position to make until next month.

"There are still a lot of unknowns," said Glenn Hughes, chair of the board at Parkview.

He said they have to factor in a number of things, including how the province will be supplying the finances and factoring in inflation, when the program is reducing their main source of income.

There's also the thought of what things look like going into next year, when facilities will be paying more in salaries and other things like food, an issue Hughes said that's not unique.

"We would like to opt in to (the program), and make it easier for parents," Hughes said. "It's just how do we function when we're having to reduce the fees, when we don't have a clear indication as to how our other needs are going to be met."

Many of those concerns were shared by the owner of First Steps Early Learning Centre in Guelph, a for-profit daycare.

"We are definitely thrilled for the families, and the accessibility of affordable care," said Tammy Hayes. "But we feel there is not enough information out there for the families to understand exactly what this plan can do."

She said it's a big decision for operators, whether for-profit or not, and to make a decision by the Sept. 1 deadline is "definitely a leap of faith."

"There's a lot of pieces in the plan that are still uncertain," Hayes said, adding there's a restrictive budget, including on administration costs and how much money can be made whether you are a not-for-profit or for-profit daycare. All daycares face these challenges, she said.

According to Artuso, the county is committing to a one-week turnaround to tell an operator whether they're enrolled, and will issue payment within two weeks of having a service agreement signed.

"Once their provider receives the funding, (parents) should be receiving a 25 per cent rebate to all the fees that they've paid back to April 1, 2022," she said.

"In addition to that, the service provider needs to stop collecting. They'll start to reduce the fees that they have been collecting from the parents by 25 per cent."

She said the rebate would equal out to projections the provider would typically get from parents.

That way, Artuso added, they can stop collecting the funds from families, and use the funds from the rebate to offset the revenue.

The province said the fees will be lowered in the coming years, to get to the \$10-a-day average by 2025.

There is an opt out option, she said, whether it's during the application process or after an agreement is signed and an operator starts getting funding.

"Some might delay, and not opt in in 2022, and they can later opt in in 2023," Artuso said. "There's a lot of flexibility with the service providers as to how they want to approach this funding agreement, and decide for themselves as to what they feel is best for their program."

There's also the aspect of ECE's at qualifying centres getting a pay bump.

"There will be some ECE's that have been significantly underpaid for the work that they do," Artuso said. "So as we're wanting to get this funding out the door for the fee reductions, we're also wanting to get the funding out the door so that ECE's can get paid at least \$18 an hour for the work that they do."

Administratively, it's a herculean task to take on for the county.

"It definitely is one of the largest initiatives, as far as workload, that we've been asked to undertake," Artuso said. "(But) it's so beneficial to families, it's so beneficial to the workforce and the community at large.

"We're doing our best, right now, to get this out and done as quickly as possible, trying to make sure that the information that we're receiving from the province is accurate, and making sure that what we're communicating to the service providers is accurate and clear as possible."

It's so much work though, Artuso adds they will need to create and hire more positions down the line.

For now, priorities are being adjusted by staff, including taking on extra hours to make sure the work gets done.

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