

Most Waterloo region child-care centres expected to opt into \$10-a-day program, region says ^[1]

But worker shortages may affect program's future, say providers

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EXCERPTS

Most child-care centres in Waterloo region are expected to opt into the federal program that will eventually reduce fees to \$10 per day, the region says.

Bethany Wagler-Mantle, the supervisor of early learning and child-care business administration for the region, said staff have been in touch with nearly all local child-care providers, and based on those conversations "we do expect that the majority will opt-in by the Sept. 1 deadline."

She said the new program will be a "huge, transformational change" to child care in Ontario and so the region has fielded many questions about how it could impact local businesses.

"We're really working to answer any of the questions that they have and just to ensure that it's a sustainable approach that responds to their needs as well as making childcare affordable for families," she said.

There are 65 agencies in the region that run more than 200 child-care centres. Of those 65 agencies, so far, just one has officially opted in, but Wagler-Mantle said that's not a surprise. The centres only received paperwork on June 30 and it will take many weeks to fill out the forms.

Program 'a game changer for families'

CBC Kitchener-Waterloo reached out to more than 50 local child-care centres to get their thoughts on the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child-Care System, the federal program being delivered by the province and overseen locally by the regional municipality.

Most said they plan to opt in to the program, but some expressed concerns with the looming Sept. 1 deadline.

Lori Prospero, CEO of of RisingOaks Early Learning in Kitchener, said time she would normally spend supporting the accounting team and working through applying to a new program is currently being spent "trying to figure out: how are we staffing our program tomorrow or next week."

"We have to go through and ... restate our entire 2022 budget in order to align with how the region's collecting the information. And at the same time are also working on our 2023 budgets. So it's definitely a complex process."

Prospero said it would be nice if the province could extend the deadline by a month or two to give child-care centres breathing room.

Meanwhile, eager parents have had lots of questions about how the program will work and when they can expect to see refunds or lower fees, she said.

"This investment is historic for our sector and it's a game changer for families," Prospero said, adding her centre has seen an uptick in the number of people seeking child care and adding their names to the RisingOaks wait list.

"I think we need to ask everyone to be patient because it is going to take time," she said.

Concerns raised

Some privately owned centres responded to CBC K-W to say they're concerned with how their spending may be monitored by the government and whether there would be a cap on how much an owner could take as a salary.

Andrea Hannen, executive director of the Association of Day Care Operators of Ontario, said she's heard similar concerns.

"There are questions about what the actual contracts will look like, how the funds will be administered, and whether or not the funding is going to be sufficient to ensure that centres can maintain the quality of program they currently provide or even remain financially viable,"

Hannen said.

"Nobody wants to opt in and then see the program's terms and conditions change unexpectedly and be forced to opt out. Everybody's trying to provide stability and quality for families. So we really need a little bit more insight into how this thing is going to go."

If a child-care centre doesn't opt into the program this year, parents who send their children there won't be eligible for any 2022 rebates or reduction in fees. The province is expected to reopen the application process next year.

Fees in 2022 will be reduced by 25 per cent this fall, retroactive to April 1, meaning parents will get a rebate cheque after their centre opts in.

Further fee reductions to 50 per cent are expected by the end of the year, so a family paying \$70 a day for care now should expect to pay \$35 a day by the end of the year if their centre opts in.

The reduction to \$10 a day isn't expected until 2025-2026, the province says.

Worker shortage

Along with the reduction in fees, the province has promised more child-care spaces will be opened up. But Carolyn Ferns wonders how.

Ferns, the public policy co-ordinator for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, said the child-care industry is facing a staffing crisis.

"If we're having trouble staffing programs now, how are we going to meet the demand of all sorts of parents that are going to want to access child care now that it's going to be more affordable," Ferns said.

"You can build the rooms, but that's nothing unless you have early childhood educators to staff those programs."

She said the agreement with the federal government says pay for early childhood educators will start at \$18 an hour with a \$1 annual increase to \$25 an hour. Ferns said the starting rate should be at \$25 an hour.

"This is a chance to do it because we're moving to a more publicly funded system," she said. "We're not going to be able to solve this workforce shortage until we have decent work and pay for it."

Kim Decker, CEO of YWCA Cambridge, said the federal and provincial governments also need to have a very clear workforce strategy to move forward.

"We have to take a look at how as a community, as a society, we have undervalued care work for a very long time," she said.

"I think it's also a change of attitude in terms of how we value the work that child-care workers are doing and remunerate them in a way that is fair and equitable and looking at working conditions, ensuring that everyone has paid sick days, ensuring that there's a pension so that folks actually look at child care as a long-term career option for them."

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: Canada-wide agreements ^[4]

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