

Daycares have two weeks left to opt into \$10 a day program. Here is where things stand ^[1]

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Source: CP24

Format: Article

Publication Date: 15 Aug 2022

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Roughly 60 per cent of Toronto's non-profit childcare centres have opted into the federal government's \$10 a day program ahead of a Sept. 1 deadline, but the uptake among for-profit centres has lagged behind.

The latest data reveals that 535 of the approximately 1,000 licensed operators in Toronto had applied to opt into the program as of last week, while 28 had signalled their intention to opt out.

However, participation in the program so far appears to vary considerably depending on a centre's operating model.

The city says that about 444 of Toronto's 726 non-profit centres have filed paperwork to join the program so far, with hundreds more expected to make their intentions clear by the deadline.

But as of last week, only 91 for-profit operators had opted in, accounting for less than 30 per cent of those centres.

In an interview with CP24.com, Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care President Carolyn Ferns said she's optimistic there will be "nearly 100% uptake" among non-profit centres by the deadline to receive funding for 2022.

That funding would then be used to reduce parent fees by 25 per cent on average retroactive to April 1.

Ferns, however, conceded that there is more uncertainty around for-profit centres, which account for about a quarter of all childcare spaces in Toronto.

Many of those centres have expressed concerns about the long-term impacts of signing onto the agreement and whether they will be able to ultimately reduce fees to \$10 a day with the level of funding provided.

"I have heard their arguments but at the end of the day this is real money for parents and there's no risk to them this year (when fees only had to be reduced by 25 per cent)," she said. "They say 'Oh well, what if we opt in this year and we have to opt out and tell parents that their fees are going back up?' Well, yeah, I guess that would be hard but I think it would be harder to tell parents you are going to keep \$5,000 that they are owed. I just think that is really unethical."

When the Ford government reached a \$13.2 billion agreement with the federal government in March, becoming the last province to do so, it indicated that parents could start receiving rebates retroactive to April as soon as the spring.

But that has not materialized in Toronto, where officials say that operators won't even be informed of their application status until after the Sept. 1 deadline. Rebates retroactive to April 1 would then likely begin in October, a spokesperson said.

Fern's organization represents nearly 200 non-profit centres.

She told CP24.com that while there were a lot of concerns about the impacts of changing the way childcare is funded originally, most centres she has spoken to recently have either already applied to the \$10 a day program or are in the process of doing so.

Ferns said "clear policy communication" around the program has perhaps been "absent" at times, contributing to anxiety among some operators.

But she said that is somewhat by design, with the guidelines for participating in the program in 2023 yet to be finalized.

"There is an understanding that there is going to be some flexibility this year and that's kind of why they did this two-stage process," she said. "They are saying 'Let's work out the kinks and lumps this year and then consult with the sector to set up, you know, a system that works for next year.' I think that's what they're trying to do right? And that is all that they could do, because if they had come out of the gate, you know, back in April, with really strict, really detailed funding guidelines and then it turned out that they didn't work, you know, it would have been much worse."

Operators concerned about slashing fees without firm funding guarantees for 2023

Under the terms of the agreement with the federal government, centres participating in the program will have to reduce fees by an average of 25 per cent immediately and then by another 25 per cent in 2023.

The ultimate goal of the agreement is to see childcare fees further reduced to an average of \$10 a day by 2026.

Speaking with CP24.com, Ferns said that she hopes that most for-profit centres eventually opt-in for 2022 “as an act of good faith,” knowing that they can always opt-out in subsequent years.

But Maggie Mosser, who is a director of the Ontario Association of Independent Childcare Centres, says that operators are having a hard time with the prospect of slashing fees when little is known about funding levels in 2023 and beyond.

“When we talk about reducing the revenues, we are talking about reducing the money the center has to operate,” she told CTV News Toronto on Monday. “So in order to make sure that the centres are viable, we have to make sure that we know what stream of funding is going to replace the revenues and that's the part that's not clear at this time.”

Mosser said that so far none of the roughly 300 for-profit centres that her association represents have opted into the program, to her knowledge. However, she did say that the group met with Education Minister Stephen Lecce earlier this week to talk about “about solutions that would make it possible for parents to get their funding for 2022” while tweaks to the program for 2023 are considered.

“We are feeling hopeful and optimistic that changes can be made that will accommodate the needs of private business as well as public centres,” she said.

Elsewhere in the GTA, Peel Region has said that 173 of its 194 licenced childcare operators have completed an expression of interest in the program so far.

Only 13 had formally completed the paperwork to opt in but a spokesperson told CP24.com last week that the Region expects the number of applications to pick up considerably as the Sept. 1 deadline nears.

Meanwhile, in York Region 197 of 557 licenced centres had formally submitted their applications to opt in as of last week. Five centres had opted out, all of which are for-profit.

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