

Ontario parents, daycare operators confused by province's child-care subsidy rollout ^[1]

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Source: The Globe and Mail

Format: Article

Publication Date: 13 Sep 2022

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Dahlia Pervez, a lawyer who lives in Ottawa, has one child in daycare, another who may soon be and a growing sense of frustration.

In March, Ontario announced it had signed the national Early Learning and Child Care Agreement. It was the last jurisdiction in Canada to do so, putting it on a path to reducing fees to an average of \$10 a day by 2025. At the time, the province told parents they could begin to see a reduction of up to 25 per cent in fees in May, with savings retroactive to April, with another 25-per-cent reduction by the end of the year.

But six months later, Ms. Pervez still does not know when or if savings will be coming.

"It's very, very frustrating. And there's absolutely no guidance," she said. "We're not even able to properly budget or financially plan because we don't even understand what the true costs are going to be for child care."

Parents and child-care operators in Ontario say there is a troubling lack of transparency in the rollout of the program. Some operators say that without more clarity they may not join this year, if at all. But the good news for many parents in Toronto and other municipalities in the province is that money is expected to begin flowing to the centres and reducing parents' fees by next month.

Toronto has received 591 responses from child-care operators as of last month, a spokesperson for the city said. Of those, 560 have indicated their intent to opt in to the program, while 31 operators have indicated their intent to opt out. Of the 560 operators that have opted in, 464 are not-for-profit and 96 operators are for-profit. Of the 31 operators that have opted out, 13 are not-for-profit and 18 are for-profit.

Close to 500 applications have been reviewed and approved, said Shanley McNamee, general manager of children's services at the city.

"We anticipate that operators will start to receive their money at the very beginning of October," she said.

In the Region of Peel, a municipality west of Toronto that has a population of more than 1.3 million, fewer than 40 of the approximately 190 licensed child-care operators have so far opted in to the program, but they represent 43 per cent of child-care spaces, said Suzanne Finn, director of early years and child-care services.

None have received funding yet, but money is expected to begin flowing to them "in the coming weeks," she said.

"Families in Peel will start to get rebates in the Region of Peel pretty quickly," Ms. Finn said.

A spokesperson for the province said the government was working with municipal and federal partners as quickly as possible to get money back into the pockets of parents with reduced child-care fees.

Last month, the province extended the deadline for centres to opt in to the program from Sept. 1 to Nov. 1, and released new guidelines in part because operators complained about a lack of clarity.

"There was some confusion around the provincial guidelines from operators," Ms. McNamee said.

Some operators say there is still a lack of transparency that makes them reluctant to join the program.

"There's really no indication of what's going to happen next year," said Lisa Parise, vice-president of Wee Watch, a network of 44 non-profit homecare agencies. "We have to opt into this program, but they're saying we don't know next year what's going to happen or how much money there will be."

Ms. Parise said it is not yet clear if the province will fund any new spaces that a centre or homecare agency adds, potentially putting them in a devastating financial position.

"It's scary as an operator," she said.

Stella Bailey, owner of The Kangaroo's Pouch, a for-profit daycare in London, Ont., said she will be opting in to the program despite her worries that the rules may change next year.

"There's a lot of unknowns," she said. "I'm just taking a leap of faith that this will work out."

With many operators still deciding whether to opt in or not, parents are becoming increasingly frustrated.

"It just makes planning life incredibly hard, especially for the cohort of us who had little ones during the pandemic. There was a lot of other sort of financial strains during that time," said Ashley Wettlaufer, an alcohol policy research methods specialist who lives in Mississauga, where her son is in daycare.

"It influences where we live and whether we move and buy a home," she said. "Daycare is a big chunk of our income."

Ontario was the last jurisdiction in Canada to sign the child-care agreement, putting parents there behind others across the country who may already be seeing savings.

But another complicating factor is that Ontario is unique in that child care is administered through the province's 47 municipalities.

Once the province signed the agreement it had to send it to the municipalities, which then had to review it and create their own contracts for service providers. Then those service providers, many of which have volunteer boards that typically don't meet over the summer, have had to review the contracts to decide to opt in or not.

There is no way that process could be administered as quickly as the province's timeline seemed to suggest, said Martha Friendly, executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, a Toronto-based think tank.

More transparency around the process might temper the expectations of those with children in care, she said.

"Parents are kind of twisting in the wind."

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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Canada-wide agreement ^[5]

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