

Quebec private day-care operators scramble as law limits daily charges to \$7 [CA-QC] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

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New provincial regulations that take effect Aug. 31 will prevent all subsidized day cares from charging parents more than \$7 a day for each child.

Additional charges will only be permitted for specific outings, hygienic products and extra meals.

Parents in private day cares fear the prohibition will force owners to gut their services as they struggle to make ends meet.

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The province spends \$1.6 billion a year for its day-care system, including daily subsidies ranging between \$30 and \$50 per child. Parents top that off with a \$7 contribution.

Family Minister Carole Theberge insists that the total funding available to day cares is sufficient to provide a quality service to Quebec's children.

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The government also wanted to end abuses where some operators had begun to charge for stroller storage, waiting lists, diaper changes, and dressing youngsters.

"We want to ensure that parents really have a choice at \$7 and that it's not \$7 plus more and more."

Some 30 operators that receive no government support won't be affected by the changes.

But those who receive subsidies fear they will be forced to lay off staff, reduce the quality of meals or cut elsewhere if they can't charge more than the minimum.

"We don't want to go on strike," said Sylvain Levesque, a Montreal day-care owner who is president of the Quebec Association of Private Day Cares.

"We don't want to take parents as hostages but we will have to reduce services for sure."

Some day cares have found a legal loophole that will allow them to charge parents the same, if not more, than they do now. They would reduce their hours to the 10-hour provincial minimum and then charge an amount above \$7 for an extra hour or two of service.

Using this revenue to pay for a day care's main operations would be dishonest and could face a challenge to Quebec's better business bureau, said Levesque.

It's also not a solution because many parents will simply refuse the added charge, he said. More importantly, it doesn't resolve the problem that at its core is about funding inequity between public and private day cares.

The funding model gives private operators about \$7 per child less each day in subsidies than public-run day care.

That amounts to about \$147,000 a year for an 80-spot centre. And unlike public centres, private operators have to pay property, sales and income taxes.

"I think it's completely fair to charge under \$7 a day (on top of the \$7 required by law) to cover the gap of subsidy," Levesque said.

While he charges just \$4 extra (\$11 in total), some operators have given the private operators a bad name by charging upwards of \$23 total per day, he said.

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