

Toronto parents angered by closing of city-run daycare ^[1]

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 24 Nov 2010

EXCERPTS

About 50 families who rely on a city-run daycare in Toronto's west end are scrambling in the wake of news their top-rated centre is closing in six weeks.

They are upset about the short notice and say families can't afford to lose the spaces, especially since another daycare in the area closed last June.

"This has been really stressful for children and families and we just don't think the system is being managed well at all," said Petra Kukacka, whose 2 1/2-year-old daughter Delphi is one of 46 toddlers, preschoolers and school-age children at Dovercourt Child Care Centre being uprooted because of the move.

City officials, who are meeting with parents Tuesday night, say the daycare on Dovercourt Rd., just north of College St., is closing because it shares a building with a city social services office that will be undergoing long-awaited renovations in the New Year.

The city initially believed the daycare could remain open during construction. But provincial licensing officials objected, citing safety concerns. Parents have been told the centre will close for good on Christmas Eve.

The centre, which doesn't serve infants, was already slated to close with the phase-in of all-day kindergarten and school-based after-hours care, said Elaine Baxter-Trahair, general manager of Toronto Children's Services.

Next month's closing in the middle of the school year is not optimal, she acknowledged. But the city is adding new spaces to nearby daycares so children in school will still be within walking distance, she said.

"We know it's not the ideal time," said Baxter-Trahair. "But we are doing everything we can to make sure that this is as smooth as it can be for the children and for their parents."

One bright spot is that daycares that expand due to Dovercourt's demise will be in better financial shape, Baxter-Trahair noted. The West End YMCA's child care program, around the corner on College St., will see 25 new school-age spots and new toddler spaces will be opening at the Y's Shirley St. centre.

There will be a net loss of just four spaces, she added.

But with 17,000 Toronto children waiting for subsidies and many non-subsidy parents lining up for years to secure a full-fee spot for their children, the city should be adding - not axing - service, advocates say.

Dovercourt is the second daycare in the area to be lost in the past six months, said Jane Mercer of the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care. Kent Child Care, a 50-space centre in Kent Public School near Dufferin and Bloor St., closed in June due to financial difficulties.

"There has been a lot of turmoil for families in the community," said Ward 18 Councillor-elect Ana Bailao, who has been fielding angry calls from parents.

"The closing of this centre and the reduction of spaces is a huge concern to me," she added.

For Kukacka's daughter Delphi, who started at Kent daycare last year and was bumped to Dovercourt last spring, this will be her second move in six months.

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Region: Ontario ^[2]

Tags: accessibility ^[3]

spaces ^[4]

outcomes ^[5]

school system ^[6]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7856> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/accessibility> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/spaces> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/outcomes> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/school-system> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/full-day-kindergarten>