

Nunavik childcare centres face ongoing closures, decontamination ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The maintenance and renovation of Nunavik's childcare centres continues to take a toll on services and forced closures of the Kativik Regional Government-run centres.

In recent years, most of the region's 20 centres have been temporarily closed so they can be decontaminated for mould or oil exposure, often caused by burst pipes.

At the beginning of 2016, an oil spill at Aqavik childcare centre in Kangiqsualujuaq forced that centre to close and relocate services to the community centre.

The centre has been cleaned, but fumes from the spill still linger, said Julie-Ann Berthe, assistant director of the KRG's sustainable employment department, which oversees Nunavik's 20 childcare centres and 1,054 childcare spaces.

Over the Christmas holidays, the furnaces at Iqitauvik childcare centre in Kuujuaq gave out when three of the centre's windows were left open during its holiday closure.

That caused the pipes to freeze at the centre, one of the region's largest, with spots for 80 children.

Crews had to install a ventilation system and replace the centre's toilets and sinks.

"We're always in a shortage of maintenance staff," Berthe told KRG council meetings Feb. 23.

Other organizations, like the housing bureau or even community members, will often lend a hand to help clean up or repair problems, she said.

But the costs of these maintenance issues are steep. Of the KRG's \$31.9 million budgeted to its childcare section this year, almost \$10 million of that is allocated to renovations at four of its centres in 2016: Kuujuaq, Kuujuaaraapik, Inukjuak and Kangirsuk.

Kangirsuk is waiting on a new \$3.2 million centre after extensive mould was discovered in its walls last winter.

After an inspection, the KRG deemed it more cost effective to build a new 30-space centre than to completely decontaminate the old one.

The construction of Nunavik's childcare centres was staggered in the region's communities beginning in the late 1990s and through the mid-2000s, while some communities have seen second and even third centres built in more recent years.

In some cases, mould has been found to be linked to poor construction of those older centres.

A lawsuit the KRG filed against one of the centres' builders helped to pay for renovations in some of the affected centres.

When a centre faces a maintenance issue, that's tough for Nunavik families, who rely on their community's only childcare centre for their children's care.

If a centre shuts down for renovation or maintenance in a small community, parents are forced to bring their children to work with them, or stay home.

Across the region, 359 families remain on a waiting list for childcare spaces: 264 of them with infants and 95 with toddlers 18 months of age and up.

The KRG's sustainable employment department said it's currently reviewing building inspection reports from three childcare centres, in Kuujuaq, Inukjuak and Salluit, while it waits on completed inspections for the centres in Ivujivik and Kangiqsuaq.

The KRG has also put in place new funding criteria for individual childcare centres across the region.

Starting this year, centre management must fill out occupancy reports each month, Berthe told KRG councillors Feb. 23, which indicate the number of registered children.

Subsidies are adjusted and distributed according to that report, she said.

Childcare centres in Nunavik are also required to provide the KRG and the province with audited financial statements and activity reports each June.

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Region: Quebec ^[3]

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