

Child care providers prepare to re-open with limitations

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By Chris Drost

On the afternoon of June 9 Premier Doug Ford announced that child care facilities in the province would be allowed to open starting June 13, but the details did not follow until later that evening.

The Bancroft Times caught up with Jessica Anderson, executive director at North Hastings Children's Services, earlier in the day, shortly after the announcement. At that point in time she had not received any guidance or advance information about the re-opening. "I only heard it on the news and that we would be charged \$1,000 per day per child for not following the guidelines," she said.

When the "Operational Guidance During COVID-19 Outbreak" document was received late in the evening, it answered some questions that Anderson had, but not all.

Essentially, facilities are to group children into what they are calling cohorts. Each cohort can have a maximum of 10 people, including the adult supervisors. The ages can be mixed so that children from one family fall into one cohort as long as director approval has been granted on the facility's license. The staff for each cohort will remain the same for the duration of the program for a minimum of seven days. The maximum capacity rules do not apply to special needs resource staff on site.

Each cohort must stay together throughout the day and are not permitted to mix with other cohorts. Facilities must maintain the ratios of staff to children under their license but cannot exceed the maximum of 10 individuals per cohort.

More than one child care program can be offered per building as long as they are able to maintain separation between the programs and cohorts. In the case of home child care providers, there is no change to the maximum number of children, six, not including the provider's own children. Staff must only work from one location and supervisors must limit movement between rooms. The required number of staff will be what is set out in the facility's license. All other certifications such as first aid training, WSIB and Vulnerable Sector Checks must be adhered to as usual. Anderson expressed concern about staff getting all these current with such short notice to re-open. "For example, staff require a Vulnerable Sector Check within 15 days of their anniversary," she said. About 30 staff members of NHCS have been laid off during the pandemic.

There will need to be new protocols in place for parents dropping off their children, including daily health screenings for staff, children, parents/guardians and visitors that include daily temperature checks. The same applies for home child care providers. A minimum distance of two metres must be maintained and the facility must keep a daily record of screening results. Children are not to attend if they have any symptoms of illness, even a mild cold.

Under the new guidelines, communication with all families must include the sharing of information about health and safety measures and expectations, keeping children who are sick at home and information about daily screening protocols. Anderson says, "We are already heavily regulated to begin with. We have many sanitation protocols in place, including daily health checks for children. We are prepared but need the detailed information from the Ministry of Education."

Beyond the new regulations, Anderson has some concerns around the viability of the new program. With the number of children reduced, and the need for staff ratios to be maintained, she says, "It will take some time to figure out how we will be viable and operate. Otherwise we are doing a disservice to everyone and we will lose the centre. We are already operating in a deficit."

The new guidelines say that the fees to parents cannot be increased on re-opening and operators are prohibited from charging or accepting fees or deposits to add families to a priority list for spaces. Furthermore, operators cannot charge parents fees if they do

not have access to a space or decide not to accept a space. Licensed home providers must give parents 30 days to indicate whether they want to keep their space. After 30 days, payments would be required to secure the space whether the child attends or not.

Although reports quoting the Minister indicated that parents would not lose their space for their child if they choose not to have the child return to care immediately, there is nothing in the guidelines that states that. This would be a concern according to Anderson, because who would pay for leaving those spaces empty?

Anderson also expressed concern about how the decision will be made on which children will be accepted back given that the number of spaces will be limited. "I am not prepared to make that decision without some guidance from the ministry," she said. The new guidelines provide some general considerations for prioritizing families. It suggests when determining priorities that returning children served through emergency child care (which was not offered in Bancroft) be offered placement and continuity of service, families where parents must return to work outside the home and families with special circumstances such as children with special needs, and other local circumstances, be given consideration. It suggests that a survey be conducted to determine what level of care families will need as some may now prefer part-time only.

One of the major concerns that Anderson is facing, is knowing how much the centre will receive from April forward for overhead costs. She has not yet received this information.

With Stage-2, summer day camps are now permitted. Anderson says "We already have a plan to operate either a virtual or a combination virtual and in-person program this summer. Staff are currently being hired. We have COVID guidance but need the new regulations. Either way, we are prepared to go." The day camp is especially important to local families, according to Anderson. "We did surveys with 79 families and it clearly identified that children of all ages are struggling with isolation and boredom," she explained.

Anderson had received no information yet about expectations for the school-age program at York River Public School. The new guidelines however, says that school boards are required to find safe ways to provide child care operators with sufficient time to enter their centres located in schools in order to prepare their space and ensure they meet the operation guidelines provided by the ministry. It suggests school boards and child care partners should work collaboratively to ensure that licensed child care programs located in schools are able to re-open and that health and safety policies and requirements are complementary and aligned with the advice of local public health officials.

While the provincial government has said that child care facilities can re-open on Friday, June 13, Anderson says that NHCS will not be ready on that day. There is a lot of work to be done prior to re-opening, including developing written protocols for staff to follow, training, removing toys and other items that cannot be easily disinfected, planning a drop-off and screening protocol that meets the guidelines, ensuring any adjustments to the operating license have been made as required, informing parents, establishing the priority list for placements, making physical changes that support physical distancing and more.

"In recent years we have moved away from plastic toys to more natural ones made of wood. These cannot be cleaned as easily and so we will have to remove them. What about children that want to bring a special blankie from home, these are all things that have to be considered and policies developed to meet the guidelines," says Anderson. Keeping cohorts separated outside and the use of outdoor equipment is something that also will have to be considered.

In the interim, the EarlyON program is currently running virtually, including the School Readiness Program where parents can obtain a "Get Ready for K Kit" for their child.