

AECEA's position on the Government of Alberta's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in regards to the early learning and child care sector

The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (AECEA) is the professional organization that represents early childhood educators in the province of Alberta. We stand strong alongside our early childhood educators during this difficult time.

On March 15, 2020, The Government of Alberta mandated that all licensed child care centres, preschools, and out of school care programs close their doors to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. We understand this was a difficult decision to make, but a necessary one. Approved day homes have been allowed to stay in operation, caring for limited numbers of children. We appreciate the government's quick response to this pandemic and the Minister of Children's Services' ongoing efforts to keep the sector informed through emails and town halls.

We understand that the government is currently in the process of reopening select child care centres to care for children of essential service workers (front line health care workers and first responders). This is important as we need these vital services to care for the citizens of Alberta. Recognising the importance of this strategy and valuing the work people are doing frontline, please consider that reopening child care centres for emergency relief will put a lot of pressure on the centres that have been selected and have agreed to participate. They will be bringing in new children and families into spaces that may be unfamiliar. Early childhood educators will be leaving their own families at home to provide this care and then putting their loved ones at higher risk each day when they return home.

We know from previous disaster events, such as the Fort McMurray fires of 2016, that this can put a mental and physical strain on the children, families, early childhood educators, and directors. Mental health supports should be in place to offer strategies to ensure that all parties can cope with additional stress.

We are calling on the government to put in additional supports for child care centres that are providing emergency relief, just as other provinces have begun to do. These centres need support and tools to care for these children. Some regions are also offering child care for free to the essential service workers. These workers are making a huge sacrifice for the greater good of our province and deserve to receive these services for free. We are also asking the government to put in other support measures for early childhood educators working in the emergency relief centres, educators working in approved family day homes, centres that have been mandatorily closed, and early childhood educators that are out of work due to closure.

Please see the next two pages for recommendations made in consultation with our membership and other stakeholders.

AECEA's Recommendations:

*Please note that AECEA is the voice of Alberta's early childhood educators; this includes a belief in a well-supported, comprehensive system for early learning and child care. This system includes parents, the government, other stakeholders AND the child care centres, preschools, day home agencies, and out of school cares that hire or contract these early childhood educators. *

We are recommending *those early childhood educators working as approved family day home providers and staff in emergency relief child care centres:*

- Be shown respect and recognition as a critical service to the citizens of Alberta. This includes being well-supported and well-compensated for the work done.
- Be paid for their regular full month's wage including wage enhancement, even if they are sent home early some days due to low numbers. This will demonstrate recognition and show appreciation for the extraordinary lengths they are going to provide care during this crisis.
- Be paid the Northern Living Allowance, if eligible.
- Be given paid sick days as needed.
- Be provided compensation for loss of income due to lower numbers in their approved family day home.
- Be offered ongoing mental health supports during, and after, the time they are working as an emergency service.
- Be trained in psychological first aid by Alberta Health Services.
- Are supported in offering high quality early learning and child care (not simply custodial care).

We are recommending that *emergency relief child care centres:*

- Be provided additional clarification on social distancing during meal times.
- Be given additional compensation to cover costs associated with operating with reduced enrollment. The payment should equal 75% of the centre's average monthly operating expenses.
- Be offered ongoing mental health supports for directors, children, and families during and after the pandemic crisis.
- Be paid directly for child care services, instead of the essential service workers having to pay for this themselves.
- Be paid for enhanced ratio to ensure additional staff for regular break times and cleaning.
- Be compensated for all staff's regular full month's wages including wage enhancement.
- Be compensated for all staff's Northern Living Allowance, if eligible.
- Be compensated for sick days for staff.
- Be assured that the government will cover the centre's liability as insurance companies may not.
- Be included in all compensation and support other centres receive for re-opening.

We are recommending that *ALL early childhood educators who are out of work due to mandatory closure*:

- Be shown respect and recognition as a critical service to the citizens of Alberta. This includes being well-supported and well-compensated for the work they do on an ongoing basis for Alberta's children and families.
- Be provided additional compensation. With early childhood educators receiving only 55% of their wages through Employment Insurance, it makes it very hard for them to stay afloat. Even with federal assistance, these educators and their families will suffer.
- Be paid the Northern Living Allowance, if eligible.

We are recommending that *ALL child care centres, preschools, and out of school cares that have been mandatorily closed*:

- Be provided compensation from loss of revenue over and above what is being offered by the federal government.
- Be compensated for all staff's Northern Living Allowance, if eligible.
- Receive support to help ensure they can pay their fixed costs, like rent/lease/mortgage during the temporary closure, so they can reopen when able.
- Be assured insurance coverage will be paid out (if they carried business insurance that included loss of revenue as we have heard some programs are being denied).

We ask that you please note the inclusion of all types of early learning and care programs in this document. Historically, licensed preschools have not received the same levels of support as other types of child care programs. AECEA knows that many working parents use preschools as part of their child care strategy, in combination with other types of child care or with familial assistance. AECEA believes that preschools and their early childhood educators deserve the same level of respect and support as the rest.

Quality child care is a matter of importance for all Albertans, especially during times of crisis. AECEA knows that the Government of Alberta wants to ensure its citizens are healthy, safe, and well-supported. We would like to use this challenging time to build AECEA's relationship with the government. AECEA already has a strong relationship with the early learning and child care community in Alberta and we offer our organization as an important resource when making decisions. We implore the government to implement the above recommendations to ensure that all child care centres answering the call for emergency relief are well-supported in this challenging work. We implore the government to reach out to AECEA.

It is imperative that we all work together. Now is the time for Alberta to demonstrate a true understanding of the vital work done in the field of early learning and child care and by the early childhood educators working with Alberta's children and families. Alberta should be working towards a quality system that is planned for, receives sustainable funding and is delivered by well-educated, well-compensated early childhood educators who are appropriately supported in their workplaces.