

REGIONAL

Day care operators confused over state directives; reopening on hold



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Charlene Frock (left), owner of Frock Child Care Center in Mt. Pleasant, discusses the challenges of operating a child care center in the coronavirus pandemic.



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Flo Warren (left), director of the Our Baby's Place daycare center in Upper Tyrone Township, and Shirley Hough, owner of Our Baby's Place.

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Concern over changes in state rules and recommendations guiding child care centers amid the coronavirus scare — and worry over their liability if a child in their care becomes ill with covid-19 — have kept some closed after obtaining state waivers to remain open.

“They have been confused and frustrated. It’s a mess,” Diane Barber, executive director of the Pennsylvania Child Care Association, said of the situation.

“We just need some answers. We want to know what is going on,” said Charlene Frock, owner of Frock Child Care Center in Mt. Pleasant, which served about 140 children before closing March 17.

Frock claimed orders from the governor's office sometimes contradict information from the state Department of Human Services, a contention denied by department spokeswoman Ali Fogarty.

Child care centers had to obtain waivers after the state deemed them non-essential businesses that were urged on March 16 to close. Gov. Tom Wolf ordered 150 types of non-essential businesses to close March 19.

As of Friday, the state had granted more than 700 waivers to child care facilities to continue operating, according to Human Services Department Secretary Teresa Miller.

"I feel bad for DHS. They (the governor's office) are not giving them any answers," said Shirley Hough, owner of Our Buddy's Place in Upper Tyrone, Fayette County, which has about 120 children.

"(Gov. Wolf is) not giving us answers," said Stephanie Penn, owner of Today's Learning Childcare & Learning Academy in South Greensburg, which serves about 165 children.

All three day care centers are closed until the governor lifts the order restricting non-essential businesses. Penn said she will open either April 6 or after Easter, while Hough said she won't open until "I feel we are safe."

Part of the problem for the Child Care Association's 2,300 members has been that the state's directives aimed at child care centers were "all rolled out in pieces," Barber said. "They don't know if (directives) mean what the government says," Barber added. The association conducted a webinar recently about operating in a coronavirus environment that generated 250 questions, she noted.

One center that has remained open is Cynthia Franck's Childcare in Penn Hills, which obtained a waiver.

"We are serving children of nurses, nursing home employees and other employees in the health care field," said Donna Garvelle, director of the center.

With about 20 children enrolled, Garvelle said they are only serving about half of the youngsters they normally see.

Garvelle said they are taking extra precautions to reduce the possible spread of any infection.

"We're constantly cleaning and disinfecting and wiping everything down," Garvelle said.

Rather than having parents come into the facility to drop off or pick up their children, the staff meets them at the door, Garvelle said.

Under the current regulations, Hough said they are put in the difficult position of turning away children of parents who work in what Pennsylvania considers a non-essential life-sustaining businesses. The waiver allows them to serve the children with a parent in a essential life-sustaining business.

With several parents of children working in Allegheny County, where there have been 158 confirmed coronavirus cases as of Friday and two deaths, “we don’t want to take that risk” that a child might catch the virus from their parents and come to the facility and expose other children and staff, Hough said.

“You have to worry about the families and the children,” Frock said.

Of the families with children at Today’s Learning Childcare, many are nurses at Excelsa Westmoreland Hospital and could be exposed to coronavirus, Penn said.

“That’s a real consideration. (The waiver) still doesn’t alleviate potential liability,” Barber said.

[Child care businesses already have “thin profit margins,” Barber said, and the women said they have lost revenue the past two weeks. They have given away perishable food such as milk, which they anticipated using over the past 10 days. Frock said she also gave away baby wipes, diapers and baby formula to people in the area.](#)

[The women said they want to open as soon as possible and are worried they will lose staff or customers the longer they remain closed.](#)

[“My main thing is I feel I am letting families down. We miss our kids,” Frock said.](#)

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