With limited guidance, some Virginia daycares remain open during coronavirus outbreak

On Friday, when Gov. Ralph Northam announced all K-12 schools in Virginia would be closed for at least two weeks due to the coronavirus outbreak, many parents’ first thought was “What about the daycares?”

Questions popped up on social media, and several folks reached out to The Virginian-Pilot to ask about whether daycares would — or should — continue operating as schools closed and much of the nation prepared to hunker down for an extended self-quarantine.

Childcare operators and advocates say there hasn’t been much guidance from state and local health officials, much to their frustration. Currently, they’re relying on limited guidance from the federal Centers for Disease Control.

At a press conference Tuesday, where he urged restaurants to limit service to takeout and said movie theaters and other businesses will likely need to close to prevent gatherings of 10 or more people, Northam said nothing about daycares.

Elsewhere, governors have ordered the closure of childcare centers in addition to schools. In Rhode Island, all childcare centers were closed starting Monday. In Kentucky, the governor has ordered all childcare centers closed by this weekend.

Some have gone in the other direction, taking steps to expand access to childcare during the outbreak. In neighboring Maryland, Gov. Larry Hogan issued an emergency order Saturday expanding childcare access to healthcare providers and first responders while schools are closed.

But in Virginia, so far, the decision to remain open or close down has largely been left up to childcare operators themselves, leaving administrators and parents with difficult choices as many parents continue to report for work.

Day cares are largely small operations; many associated with churches or other nonprofit organizations. There are more than 2,600 licensed child day centers across Virginia.

While plenty of centers have closed, like local YMCAs or daycares affiliated with schools and churches that are closing, many independent childcare centers have opted to keep caring for kids.

“We are remaining open. We still have parents who obviously have to work,” said Kelly Cahoon, the assistant director of Tinker Bell Daycare and Kindergarten in Portsmouth.

Cahoon said Tinker Bell is no longer providing classes due to the schools shutdown, but will care for kids during the day. At full enrollment, Tinker Bell cares for 82 kids. Monday afternoon, federal officials recommended people avoid gatherings of more than 10 people.

“So far, that’s just their recommendation. We’ve got parents who rely on us,” Cahoon said. “Until we get word from our state officials that we need to close, we’ll be open.”

At least one local daycare, however, is opting to close its doors following the federal guidance about limiting gatherings of 10 or more. In a Facebook post, the director of Norfolk’s Mustard Seed Child Care Center said the center would be closed starting Wednesday. The unclear and sometimes contradictory guidance is causing frustration for operators and parents alike, all over the state.

Dreama Collins operates a daycare out of her home in Hopewell, near Richmond. She said she was inundated after Northam’s announcement that schools would close for two weeks. “We’re being bombarded with phone calls from parents who are frantic,” she said. “We’re nervous. We’re upset. We’re bewildered.”

Collins said she’ll keep caring for the kids until the governor says she can’t, but she’s anxious. She cares for the children of police officers and healthcare workers.

“They’re around a lot of people every day and we don’t know what’s coming into my house now,” she said. “For now I’m staying open to provide a service to them. But if I’m honest with you, we would feel safer if we could close.”

Some daycares have gone ahead and closed, often when the institution they are affiliated with has also closed, like a school or church facility.

Susan Coard oversees a small afterschool program at Hickory United Methodist Church in Chesapeake that has closed after the bishop ordered all church activities to stop for two weeks. “It was a very difficult decision because we know there are many families in crisis,” Coard said. “We just felt like in order to protect as many people as possible, for the time being, we’d close.”

The haphazard nature of the closures is the result of a fractured industry, said Emily Griffey, the policy director for youth advocacy group Voices for Virginia's Children.

She said early childhood care and education has operators working all over the map, with some programs tied to public schools or government programs and others operating purely in the private sector.

Even some federally funded programs administered by private groups have remained open, Griffey said.

Meanwhile, public health officials aren’t giving those private groups - or those who rely on them - much direction. Parents who have to keep working as the outbreak worsens face a conundrum, Griffey said, and many worry they are putting their children at risk.

“There’s some gray areas,” Griffey said. “There’s a lot of questions coming from parents and providers on how should we proceed, and are we doing what’s in the best interest of our childrens’ health, and our business, and our employees.”

A parent herself, Griffey said she’s seen parents crying while they drop their kids off at daycare amid the outbreak.

When pressed by a reporter about whether daycares were safe or undermining potential efforts to prevent the community spread of the coronavirus, Virginia Department of Health officials pointed only to the federal Centers for Disease Control guidelines. A lengthy guidance document for schools published by the CDC mentions childcare centers periodically, but doesn’t offer specific recommendations for them.

The guidance is largely focused on strategies to reduce the risk of spread while schools and childcare centers are operating – things like cleanliness standards, keeping sick children home and utilizing social distancing techniques. But the webpage has limited discussion about closures.

That guidance includes discouraging “group childcare arrangements” if schools are suspended for a brief period, but says little on the decision to close childcare centers beyond saying administrators should “work in close collaboration and coordination with local health officials.”

The guidance webpage notes that strategies for social distancing that may be feasible in schools may not be in childcare settings.

The question of daycare closures even came up at the White House press briefing Monday afternoon. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said the federal Coronavirus Task Force would need to discuss whether daycares are equivalent to schools for purposes of that guidance.

Collins, the Hopewell woman who runs a daycare out of her home, said some recommendations just aren’t an option for operators like her.

“There’s no social distancing in childcare. It’s impossible.”

*Staff writer Sara Gregory contributed to this report.*

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