



COVID-19: State to close daycares except for children of essential workers



PHOTO COURTESY PIXABAY New Jersey daycares will be allowed to remain open only if they are caring only for the children of essential workers.

By ERIN ROLL

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New Jersey daycare centers will no longer be open, except to care for the children of essential employees.

On Wednesday, March 25, Gov. Phil Murphy issued an executive order requiring daycare and child care facilities to be open only for the children of health care workers, first responders, retail workers, and other essential employees who do not have other options for child care.

Child care centers are required to certify by Friday, March 27, that they are exclusively caring for the children of essential workers. Any centers that do not will be required to close by April 1.

“Essential personnel are a vital part of our response and limiting child care to solely these individuals will assist in flattening the curve of COVID-19 cases, as well as provide our front-line workers with the critical services they need to get through this emergency,” Murphy said in the executive order. “A lack of child care cannot be a barrier for our essential employees, and while these workers commit themselves to our New Jersey family, we will commit ourselves to protecting their families.”

“Safe, dependable childcare has always been a necessity for working families,” said Christine Norbut Beyer, the commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Children and Families. “It is even more crucial now for parents working in professions deemed essential during this public health crisis. The state’s response to, and recovery from, the novel coronavirus really hinges on the skills and ability of our dedicated first responders and essential personnel. We need to do all we can to help them do their jobs without the worry and distraction of losing safe childcare options.”

Avissa Beek-Peniston, executive director of the Neighborhood Child Care Center on Maple Avenue, said most of the parents were in essential services such as health care and the postal service. As of Wednesday afternoon, the center was waiting for specific instructions from the state on the certification steps.

The center is licensed for 85 children, but attendance has declined somewhat since the start of the outbreak, as parents are laid off or work from home. On Wednesday, there were 18 children and infants being cared for at the center. The smaller numbers are an advantage in a way, she said, since this allows for social distancing.

For example, she said, there are usually 13 infants in the center’s infant room on average. On Wednesday, there were only five.

The center has always required regular hand washing, and had previously required children who have been home sick not to display symptoms for 24 hours before returning to the center with a doctor’s note. In recent weeks, the center has been especially vigilant with sanitizing surfaces inside the center every five minutes, she said. “I told someone that my doorknobs are so shiny I can see my face in them.”

Beek-Peniston said the staff has weekly meetings to check in with the staff to see how they are doing. Any staff member who does not feel comfortable coming into work is allowed to stay home, and they will be paid. “At the end of the day, they have to feel comfortable, too.”

The Montclair YMCA is offering child care services for the children of first responders and health care workers at the Geyer Family YMCA. The service is available from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. for children ages three months to 13

years, and costs \$40 per day, per child.

“We want to make sure the medical professionals in our community have a safe place for their children to stay as they care for a growing number of our loved ones during this difficult time,” the YMCA said in a statement.

Buddy Evans, the president of the Montclair YMCA, said the YMCA had spoken to staff and administration at Mountainside Hospital, Clara Maass Medical Center in Belleville and other agencies, and determined that a need existed for child care.

“Their new normal is they’re working 24-7,” Evans said.

There will be homework help, arts and crafts and STEM projects for older children, and storytime and circle time for younger children. Healthy food and exercise opportunities will be provided.

Social distancing will be maintained, Evans said, with children being admitted one at a time at drop-off, and with activities being done in small groups. Additionally, children will have their temperature taken at the entrance, Evans said, and staff will be screened as well.

Evans said “numerous” families have already contacted the YMCA as of Wednesday evening.

Families wishing to apply for the YMCA’s service may contact Justine Biendon, the YMCA’s child care director, at jbiendon@montclairymca.org.