



# Are Child Care Centers 'Essential' Businesses?

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*A person walks past a closed craft store, Tuesday, March 17, 2020, in Havertown, Pa. Concerns about the new coronavirus have led to the temporary closure of many businesses and schools across the region. (AP Photo/Matt Slocum)*

## ***Initial confusion about Gov. Wolf's coronavirus order***

### **Ed Mahon**

**Gov. Tom Wolf said Monday** he wouldn't send the Pennsylvania State Police or National Guard to shut down child care centers.

But Diane Barber, executive director of the [Pennsylvania Child Care Association](#), said his directive to close nonessential businesses has put pressure on child care providers across the state. She said many of her members were left "confused, frustrated and afraid" after his announcement Monday that child care should close statewide.

Barber many said child care providers weren't sure if they were being ordered to close — and what the consequences would be if they didn't. Plus, in Philadelphia, Mayor Jim Kenney's administration on Monday said child care was an essential service. Some childcare centers didn't open Tuesday, while others did. Barber didn't know how many decided to remain open.

And she wasn't sure what consequences child care centers would face for defying Wolf's order, and whether staying open would have any impact on their licensing status. Even if there are not immediate consequences from state government, she said providers have concerns about legal risks.

“What if you're open and a child or adult contracts the virus?” she said. “There's a business liability.”

For child care centers, the closure order raises questions about how operators will pay their workers in the short-term and stay in business in the long-term. Barber said the state continues to offer funding to centers through a [subsidy for low-income families](#), but she said few child care centers serve only children who rely on a subsidy. Barber also has concerns about the people who rely on child care centers, particularly health care workers and others who need to work during the crisis.

The state Office of Child Development and Early Learning is [offering waivers](#) to help with the last part. Erin James, a spokesperson for the Department of Human Services, said the state recognizes that closures are “especially burdensome for essential personnel such as health care workers and first responders who must have safe and stable care options for their children in order to report to work.”

On Tuesday, Philadelphia updated its guidelines, noting that child care centers are only essential if they receive a waiver (the city is granting its own waivers in coordination with the state.). That adds some much-needed clarity. Barber said child care centers still have questions. For now, her advice to providers is to do what's best for their businesses, their staff members and the families they serve.

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