

Scrapping pro-abortion test a welcome change to Canada Summer Jobs program, employers say

Alberta employers, denied Canada Summer Jobs funding because they refused to sign an attestation supporting abortion, are relieved that the federal government will change that requirement.

“This is exciting. I’m excited about the fact that it’s opened up,” said Millie Schietzsch, director of youth ministry for the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Edmonton.

The Ukrainian Eparchy’s Camp Oselia near Wabamun Lake has relied on the Canada Summer Jobs program to subsidize wages for four to five summer employees who work as camp staff.

The Liberal government announced Dec. 6 that it would drop a controversial pro-abortion attestation in the application for Canada Summer Jobs funding, which provided roughly \$200 million to organizations and groups across the country.

Faith-based organizations, including the Ukrainian Eparchy and the Catholic Archdiocese of Edmonton, were denied because they refused to check a box in the application saying their core mandate supported reproductive rights, or right to an abortion, as well as Charter and other rights. It was widely seen as a values test by faith-based organizations.

Nevertheless, Ottawa will still prevent grant money going to jobs that seek to “undermine or restrict” access to abortion. Employers will be able to start applying for the 2019 Canada Summer Job program on Dec. 17.

The Canada Summer Jobs program provides approximately \$3,530 per summer job created, so the Eparchy lost about \$14,000.



Organizers of Camp Oselia, the Ukrainian Eparchy camp near Wabamun Lake, welcome the changes to the Canada Summer Jobs program. Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Edmonton file photo

As a result, Camp Oselia was only able to hire one employee.

“Besides the financial burden, it did change the feel of the camp because we didn’t have our young students there,” said Schietzsch, noting it added stress to the adult staff and deprived students of work experience.

The controversial attestation also affected the Catholic Archdiocese of Edmonton summer camps, Our Lady of Victory Camp near Lacombe and Camp Encounter near Lac Ste. Anne.

“We were not going to sign the attestation,” said coordinator Lisa Macquarrie. “As a result, we hired two fewer students at each camp than we did the previous summer.”

Both Archdiocesan camps lost about \$14,000 in funding.

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops reports that more than 1,400 funding applications faith-based organizations were denied for this year as a result of the attestation.

Els Van Hierden, owner of Vantage Trailer Sales in Lethbridge, said she couldn’t hire a community relations worker or a full-time maintenance worker as a result of the attestation. Van Hierden is among at least seven groups suing the federal government.

Asked about the changes announced last week, Van Hierden said she will have to review them.

“We heard that the language in the attestation sometimes led to organizations who would be eligible not applying,” said Véronique Simard, a spokesperson for Employment Minister Patty Hajdu.

“We’ve changed the attestation and clarified eligibility criteria and will be encouraging employers to use the online application system to simplify the application process,” Simard said.

“We want to be very clear that this isn’t about beliefs, but rather about ensuring the projects and activities don’t undermine or restrict the legal rights of Canadians.”

Initial reactions to the Canada Summer Jobs program changes was positive, but small businesses, faith, and pro-life groups were cautious of any problems that might come up when the changes are made.

“If they’re worried about us hiring someone to undermine or violate Canadian rights – that is definitely not happening here,” said Samantha Williams, executive director of the pro-life Alberta Life Issues Education Society, which runs The Back Porch pregnancy resource centre in Edmonton.

“ALIES and The Back Porch does not restrict or infringe on anyone’s rights. In fact, we are working to uphold the right to life. This attestation is not only an attack on pro-life Canadians but on Canadian democracy.”

ALIES’s application for funding was denied because it did not sign on to the attestation. The charity, which has received funding from the Canada Summer Jobs program in the past, plans to apply again for next year.