

New Ontario daycare rules unnecessary, city councillor says^[1]

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The chair of Ottawa's community services committee is pushing back against new rules from Queen's Park, warning that changes to daycare rules will cost families more money and cause the city to cut its own recreation programs.

Starting next September, children under the age of six will be banned from before-and-after-school programs run by the City of Ottawa. The province will only allow licensed daycare providers to look after young children.

Almost 2,000 children attend the city's unlicensed before- and after-school programs.

"It was probably well-intentioned, to provide greater safety and security to four and five year olds," Coun. Diane Deans said. "But I guess my personal feeling is that it is unnecessary. In 25 years of providing recreation programs in our city facilities we have not had a single incident."

Councillor says rules 'odd'

But the rules do not apply during holidays.

"The ministry is still allowing us to run programs for four and five year olds on PD days and summer camps. So to suggest that the rest of the year that there is a safety issue seems odd to me," said Deans.

The Ontario government was unable to clarify why the City of Ottawa can run day-long camps during the summer and on PD days, but not during the school term.

"We want to do everything we can to keep all kids safe, especially younger children who are a more vulnerable population," the minister responsible for early years and child care, Indira Naidoo-Harris, said in a written statement to CBC News.

"The Ministry of Education has been working closely with the city to help streamline licensing for its programs so they can continue to serve 4 and 5-year olds in a way that meets regulations designed to keep children safe however the city has decided not to proceed with licensing their programs."

Coun. Diane Deans says it was not financially feasible for the city to license its recreational programs as childcare.

"The ministry has communicated to us that they feel we have a choice to license all our centres. We don't feel that's a real choice because it's just so costly," Deans said.

The city says there will be an impact on city programs as a result of the changes.

Two city-run recreation programs at Orleans Woods Elementary School and Henry Larsen Elementary School will be closing as the schools implement their own extended day programming. They will no longer be leasing their facilities to the city.

Parents frustrated by changes

The change will cost Barb Shantz between \$1,200 and \$1,500 more a year as she moves her son to a licensed daycare provider. But she is more concerned about the impact it will have on her son's schedule.

Four-year old Zachary currently attends a city-run program two blocks from her home at the community centre in Greely. In September, it will be a 30-minute round trip for her to drop him at the extended day program Castor Valley Elementary School before she leaves for work. Shantz says many families in Greely will be affected.

"It is going to be a significant challenge for every single family to have to accommodate that extra half hour drive in the morning," she said.

Zachary will have to leave for school at 6:45 in the morning. He will be at Castor Valley from 7 a.m. until 6 p.m. at night, said Shantz.

"He's four years old. I don't think he should be in the same building ... for eleven hours a day," she said.

Megan Fyfe's said her four-year old son and seven-year old daughter will have to attend different daycare settings. It will mean a double drop-off and pick-up each day for the family.

"It's going to have a big impact for the next two years," she said. It will cost an extra \$150 a month to send him to the extended day program at his school, while his sister continues on at the Qualicum Community Centre.

Fyfe said she likes the community spirit at Qualicum, and the fact they hire local teenagers who have been through the after-school program themselves.

"It's just the extra time in the evening, especially in the winter with the driving conditions. Our time together as a family is precious and now to do two pick-ups, we're making our evenings that much shorter. It's just hard."

City Hall had asked for an exemption to the provinces new rules but were turned down.

The issue will be discussed at a Community and Protective Services Committee meeting on Thursday.

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