

Yasir Naqvi, councillors trade jobs over daycare spots for kids under 6 ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ottawa Centre MPP Yasir Naqvi is weighing in on the city's decision to exclude children under the age of six from some of its daycare programs, telling parents he's "very disappointed" by the move.

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

Last week the chair of Ottawa's community and protective services committee called the new law "unnecessary." Diane Deans pointed to the fact that in 25 years the city's programs have not had a single safety incident.

But in an email obtained by CBC News, Naqvi characterized the city's decision as regrettable and called it "very last-minute."

"I will be frank — I am very disappointed by the decision the city has made to discontinue this important program for our four- and five-year-old children," Naqvi said in the May 19 email to a parent affected by the decision.

Naqvi said he's been personally involved in meetings with city officials to explore ways to expedite the licensing process, and to obtain subsidies for low-income families.

The Child Care and Early Years Act, which came into effect in 2015, gave cities two years to phase in the changes, Naqvi said.

"Unfortunately, it was made clear to me that, despite all assurances, the city has made a 'business' decision to discontinue the programs," Naqvi wrote.

No 'real choice,' chair says

The city maintains it has no choice but to close the programs to four- and five-year-olds because it can't afford to conform to the new law. According to the city it would cost \$1.4 million to hire licensed early childhood educators and install appropriate infrastructure, such as small toilets, required under the legislation.

"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 in an interview last week.

The legislation was drafted in response to the Ontario Ombudsman's 2014 report following the death of a two-year-old girl in Vaughan.

At committee last week Coun. Catherine McKenney questioned whether the new legislation would have prevented that tragedy.

"I remember the incident in Vaughan and it was extremely tragic. But this change would not have changed that," McKenney told the committee. She added that the City of Ottawa provides "a whole different type of childcare service through our recreation programs than unlicensed home care."

Won't jeopardize safety: Naqvi

Naqvi told CBC News McKenney should take up her concerns with the Ontario Ombudsman, who he said made it very clear to the province that it needed to revamp its legislation to put higher safety standards in place.

"I for one will not jeopardize the lives of children," he said. "Whatever steps we need to take to ensure we have the right set of standards and safety measures in place are absolutely important because one life lost is too many."

Ottawa parent Annie Muldoon was the recipient of the letter from Yasir Naqvi. She said she's tired of the city and the province blaming each other for the decision to exclude four and five year olds from unlicensed daycare.

"Parents would really like to see a representative from the city and the province speaking to each other publicly about this issue."

Naqvi said he hopes the city will reconsider its decision.

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