

Ontario making it more affordable for home daycares to become licensed^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ontario will encourage more home daycares to join the licensed system by providing new funding to support regulated home-based care, the Star has learned.

The policy change, to be announced Tuesday as part of the province's five-year vision for early learning and child care, means home daycare providers will no longer have to pay a percentage of the daily fees they receive from parents to join a licensed home child-care agency.

And it means parents already using licensed home daycare should see a fee cut.

"This is just a small piece of our expansion plan, but it is something very different from what we have done before," a government source said. "It will increase access for families and increase spaces in the licensed home child-care sector by encouraging more operators to join a licensed agency."

Provincial operating funding for home child-care agencies will begin in 2018 and is part of Ontario's previously announced plan to create 100,000 new licensed child-care spots for children under age 4. Spaces will also be added in schools and community-based settings under the initiative that will be fleshed out on Tuesday.

The funding is in addition to \$200 million announced in the provincial budget to create 8,000 new licensed spots in child-care centres and subsidize 16,000 low- and moderate-income families this year.

About 7,500 home daycares with roughly 30,000 spots are licensed through home child-care agencies in Ontario. Agency staff visit homes a minimum of four times a year, help caregivers meet ministry standards, offer professional development, lend toys and equipment, share insurance costs and provide backup support in an emergency or illness.

Until now, agencies were funded through parent fees or subsidies. But under the change, municipalities, which are responsible for delivering child care across the province, will receive earmarked funds to pay agencies directly. Non-profit agencies will be favoured, the source said.

"If we are funded for the work we do, we don't have to charge providers, and ultimately parents through their fees," said Marni Flaherty, president of the Home Child Care Association of Ontario. The association represents about 70 licensed home daycare agencies across the province that oversee about 3,000 homes. More than 90 per cent of members are non-profit agencies.

The change will encourage more home daycare operators to join the licensed system as fees are often a sticking point, predicted Flaherty, whose association has been urging the province for years to make the change.

In licensed child-care settings, Ontario's Child Care and Early Years Act prescribes everything from staff training and physical safety to nutrition and program goals. But there are licensed spots for barely 20 per cent of children under age 4 in the province. In cities like Toronto, the average monthly cost is about \$1,400 for one child.

As the Star reported this year, many parents who can't find or afford licensed care say they are frustrated by having to rely on unlicensed options. In one case, parents had to use social media to warn others of an unlicensed home daycare provider who had been investigated for child abuse.

A series of deaths in unlicensed home daycares several years ago prompted the provincial government to tighten regulations and create a dedicated enforcement unit to investigate complaints against unlicensed operators suspected of breaking the rules. And it introduced an online database of validated complaints.

But in unlicensed settings, there is little the government can do to ensure quality and safety. No one checks to see if the home is safe.

There is no requirement for caregivers to have a vulnerable sector check, first aid or infant CPR training. There are no educational standards and no supports for parents or caregivers if something goes wrong.

Ontario currently spends more than \$1 billion annually on almost 390,000 licensed child-care spaces, including about 72,000 spots in Toronto.

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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