

# Mom wants child-care changes after son unaccounted for during inspection visits to St. John's daycare <sup>[1]</sup>

Mom says son was unaccounted for during some official visits

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

A mother in St. John's says her son was unaccounted for during multiple official checks at his former daycare, and she is now pushing for changes to Newfoundland and Labrador's regulated child-care system so the experience she called "scary" doesn't happen again.

Natasha Hunt enrolled her toddler at Little Owl Land, a regulated home-based daycare in St. John's, just prior to the pandemic's start in March 2020. Trouble began this spring with a conflict over potty training, she said, and parent and provider parted ways in May.

Regulated day homes — also called regulated family child-care homes — operate out of people's houses as opposed to daycare centres, but are still subject to a slate of provincial rules, including registering children with the licensing body and monthly on-site visits to check for compliance.

When Hunt complained about her experience to Family and Child Care Connections, the agency that oversees such day homes in St. John's, however, she got a shock.

"[An agency worker] straight up told me at that time that she had no idea who my son was, who I was, and that's kind of when all of this came to light and you know, things got very alarming for me," Hunt said.

There were at least five home visits done on days when she had sent her son, she said, but to this day, "we still don't have those answers about where he was." A letter to Hunt from Family and Child Care Connections states the home visitor never met nor saw her son.

His absence left her in "complete and utter shock," she said. She said she'd done a reference check before sending her son to Little Owl Land, read online reviews and visited it herself.

"We thought it was a really great place," Hunt told CBC News.

"But then to know that there were periods ... that he was not where he was supposed to be is very, very stressful and concerning and sad and scary for us as a family."

## Home visits disputed

Hunt's son wasn't registered at the home, and never had been.

A letter from Family and Child Care Connections to Hunt and her husband did not state their son by name but said "the agency was never made aware of this child's enrolment."

Little Owl Land's operator, Zoya Amirmaafi, declined an interview with CBC News but said her taking on Hunt's son coincided with the arrival of COVID-19 in Newfoundland and Labrador, a factor that contributed to not sending the boy's registration in.

Amirmaafi disputes Hunt's allegations about the home visits, saying her son didn't attend her daycare on the dates when a worker from Family and Child Care Connections did.

Hunt, meanwhile, said she was emailed home visit reports from the agency, and cross-referenced them with texts and photos from Amirmaafi on the inspection dates that show her son attended Little Owl Land. CBC News has reviewed these visit reports and texts.

In corrective orders issued to Amirmaafi, Family and Child Care Connections states there were children attending the daycare who weren't turning up on the daily sign-in register.

## 'A significant violation'

Hunt's complaint sparked action.

Little Owl Land's licence was revoked in June, Family and Child Care Connections confirmed to CBC. Amirmaafi said she lost her

licence for having one more child than allowed.

The Department of Education also investigated the day home, with its minister calling it "a significant violation."

"Situations like this are very uncommon. However, they are taken very seriously," said Education Minister Tom Osborne.

That investigation also reprimanded Family and Child Care Connections, which receives its funding from the government, the minister said. His staff members are working with the agency for more training, particularly around the required monthly visits.

"They didn't visit the personal home part of the operation, only the operation itself. And that was part of the reason this was not picked up by the family child-care agency," Osborne said.

Amirmaafi is now operating an unregulated daycare. Those child-care operations aren't subject to the same rules as regulated ones, but are required to have fewer children, with a cap of four. Osborne said the province checks in periodically to make sure those rules are being followed.

"We continue to monitor even though the service is now unregulated, because of the fact they were regulated and that was revoked," he said.

Osborne said revoking a day home operator's licence means that operator can no longer become regulated again.

### **Close the loopholes, says mom**

But Hunt said there are still problems with the child-care system that leave the door open to future problems.

"I think that there are loopholes that have enabled this to happen, and I think that if we could correct those or make changes, then this would alleviate that worry for another parent in the future," she said.

Chief among those loopholes, she said, is a void of information on violations. When daycare centres break child-care rules, those infractions are listed on a government website. That's not the case for their home-based counterparts.

"There is a lot of information that isn't shared with the general public that I think the government has a responsibility to ensure gets out there and is made easily accessible for parents when looking for child care," she said.

Osborne said the department can't add day homes to the website. "It's because family child-care homes are operated out of a personal family home. We do not publish the location of that home for privacy reasons," he said.

Hunt would also like the registration process changed, so parents and the agency connect directly, instead of putting the onus on daycare providers to tell the government how many children are in their care.

Hunt said she's brought her concerns to the government but was told to wait a few years until the next legislative review, when there is a public call for input.

"I think changes could be made immediately. Why would we wait, when the welfare of our children is in question?" she said.

With the province's child-care sector undergoing "a tremendous period of transition," according to Osborne, thanks to the start of \$25-a-day daycare in January and \$15-a-day daycare coming next year, incidents like this are a learning experience.

"We will use what we've learned from this to ensure that regulations in the future reflect what we've learned here," he said.

**Region:** Newfoundland <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** standards and regulations <sup>[4]</sup>

health and safety <sup>[5]</sup>

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home child care <sup>[7]</sup>

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