

City exploring business licences for child-care providers^[1]

Woolfsmith said putting up basic and reasonable barriers of entry will prevent fly-by-night operations that prey on the parents of children

Author: Thomas, Brodie

Source: Calgary Herald

Format: Press release

Publication Date: 28 Jul 2022

AVAILABILITY

Access online: ^[2]

EXCERPTS:

Some councillors were moved to tears on Thursday as they heard from the parents of children who had been harmed or killed in unregulated day homes.

The city is looking to introduce business licences for those unregulated homes starting in 2023. The move would mean day homes that provide child care without provincial regulation would have to meet new standards, such as first-aid certification and police checks for all adults in the home.

Council heard from two parents who were lobbying for the change. Shelby Stewart's youngest son was assaulted while staying at an unregulated day home, while Jennifer Woolfsmith's 22-month-old daughter, Mackenzy, died at a day home.

The two started an organization called Mackenzy's Legacy to bring about change in the industry.

Stewart, who is a police officer, described to council the shock she felt when she realized her 18-month-old son had been assaulted while at a day home. Her husband noticed marks on the child when they picked him up.

"I knew that what I was looking at was petechiae, and not a rash," said Stewart.

She said the injury is caused by broken blood vessels under the skin.

"I was working in the domestic violence unit at the time, and this was an injury I frequently saw in strangulation victims. (He) was covered from his chest, up around his neck and ears, and down his whole face."

Courts later found her son had been assaulted by the day home operator, and that there had been other victims. The person responsible was sentenced to five months in jail.

Woolfsmith shared the story of her daughter's death in 2012, and noted no regulations have been introduced since a public inquiry into her daughter's death.

"Despite the fatality inquiry, despite all we learned through the criminal proceedings, nothing substantive has been put in place to prevent these tragedies," said Woolfsmith.

The inquiry, conducted by Judge Joshua Hawkes, called for a review of the province's child-care system.

Woolfsmith said basic and reasonable standards will prevent fly-by-night operations that prey on the parents of children.

"In the future, we hope that in Calgary you can't just put a Kijiji ad up on a Friday and create a pop-up day home because you might need some extra cash, and have a full roster of children by Monday," said Woolfsmith.

Council's plan would come with extra costs for day home operators, including an annual \$172 fee for the business licence and another \$65 for background checks, which would be required for all people over the age of 18 living in the homes.

The fees will be waived for the first few months after the regulations are brought in to encourage compliance.

Once enacted, operating without a business licence could result in a \$1,000 fine.

Council is also seeking to explore planning and development tools that would enable more child-care spaces in the city.

Mayor Jyoti Gondek, who helped spearhead the proposed changes through a notice of motion while she was a city councillor in 2021, said the city was acting after seeing the province continue to allow unregulated day homes to operate.

The mayor said Woolfsmith and Stewart put things in context for her.

"We have requirements for people who wish to keep hens and pets, but none for people looking after kids," said Gondek. "So if that helps with any kind of context, thanks for making that comparison."

The motion passed committee in a unanimous vote. The proposed changes still need to get final approval from council at a future meeting.

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