

Council committee proposes background checks, business licence requirements for day-home operators ^[1]

'There are absolutely outstanding care providers in the city, but there are also monsters,' says advocate

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EXCERPTS

Tears filled the Calgary city council chamber on Thursday afternoon as a council committee held a public hearing into safety standards at unlicensed day homes.

The city is proposing requirements for operators of unlicensed day homes to increase safety and accountability at these businesses. Following the new rules, operators would be required to undergo a police background check and vulnerable sector check, obtain first aid training and a business licence.

Jen Woolfsmith's 22-month-old daughter, Mackenzy, was killed at a dayhome in 2012. Woolfsmith spoke at Thursday's public hearing, stating that her daughter was more than a name in a report or image in a news story.

"If I concentrate really hard, I can feel her sitting in my lap, snuggled and close to me," she said.

Woolfsmith said it "terrifies" her that another parent will experience what she did. Until city council brought forward its motion, Woolfsmith said no substantive change had been proposed to city day-home regulations.

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

While there is no data on the number of licensed to unlicensed day homes in Calgary, Statistics Canada reported in 2021 that 62 per cent of child-care providers in Alberta were unlicensed and home-based.

'I missed all the signs'

After her daughter's death, Woolfsmith co-founded Mackenzy's Legacy, a grassroots advocacy group founded in memory of Mackenzy.

Co-founder Shelby Stewart also spoke at the public hearing and shared the story of her toddler who was assaulted three years ago at a day home.

Stewart said when she thinks back to the day her child was assaulted, she still loses her breath.

"If I close my eyes, it comes back like a movie reel in my head, one that I've lost track of how many times I've watched it," she said.

Stewart's son was 19 months old when he was assaulted by the operator of the day home he attended. The day home provider was later charged with assault.

Stewart said what she hopes parents learn from her story is that situations like this can happen to anyone.

"I am a police officer and thought I knew what to look for, and in this case, I missed all the signs."

A year in the making

Both Stewart and Woolfsmith stressed at the public hearing how day-home providers need further supports to ensure safety standards are met.

Stewart said the changes being proposed by the city will set minimum standards and help protect legitimate day-home operators.

"We are asking these providers to take care of our most vulnerable citizens and not providing them the resources or support they need," she said.

"There are absolutely outstanding care providers in the city, but there are also monsters. My dream with Mackenzy's Legacy is to create a system where the outstanding providers have the opportunity to thrive and the monsters are no longer able to watch our children."

Mayor Jyoti Gondek and other councillors brought forward the motion to review unlicensed child care in the city last September. While Gondek said it may seem like work on the motion has taken a long time, advocates like Stewart and Woolfsmith have expressed their gratitude for the city's actions.

"Considering nothing has been done anywhere else, it did not feel like a long time to them," Gondek said.

Coun. Kourtney Penner, who chairs the city's community development committee, said it took time for city administration to engage with the public and get parents' and providers' perspectives, and have conversations with the province around child care.

"This is one of those great moments where public advocacy by private citizens to politicians is making a difference and making a change," Penner said.

Council will discuss the proposed requirements for day-home operators in September. If the motion is approved, the new rules would take effect on Jan. 1, 2023.

Region: Alberta ^[3]

Tags: family child care ^[4]

health and safety ^[5]

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