

Dozens of families scrambling to find new child care provider after Ajax daycare forced to close by end of month ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The abrupt closure of an Ajax daycare in two weeks time has left more than a hundred families scrambling to find a new space for their children.

Happy Kids Child Care, located in the Church Street North and Delaney Drive area, has been instructed to vacate the building by Aug. 31 after its lease expired and was not renewed by the landlord.

CP24.com spoke with several parents of children enrolled at the daycare, and many are frustrated about how short the notice was about the closure.

Chantelle Browne and her partner Jhsi Lewis recently got their son into Happy Kids after waiting for spots at other daycares. They say the centre has been a "fantastic" place for their child these past three months.

Browne says her child lights up when he sees the front of the building. It's her son's first daycare, and that's why she and her partner are devastated that it is shutting down at the end of the month.

"(We're) quite shocked," Browne said. "The past three months have been like so easy, knowing that our son is going there, that he's in good hands. And the staff are always so pleasant. You are just like rest assured that your kid is gonna be there and that they're gonna communicate with you if anything's going on."

"We don't want to start over."

But unfortunately, it appears that they will have to.

"This one really captured us. So to have to let that go and find somewhere else and transition our son there in under two weeks, it's impossible," Browne said.

Lewis adds it is significantly harder to find a new provider right before September, when school starts. They say they have started to inquire at other places, but many are already full and only have available slots for 2023.

"To drop this news on us in two weeks it's devastating. Because if push comes to shove and one of us has to stay home, we have to alternate staying home to look after our son. Well, what happens? If we don't work, we don't get paid," Lewis, who works as an electrician at a hospital, said.

Browne, who is a social worker, adds that they don't have family and friends close by who can help them.

"We might have to make really difficult decisions about whether or not the both of us can work," she said. "It is what we have to kind of figure out."

Browne and Lewis are just one of the more than 100 families being serviced by Happy Kids who now have to search for a new child care provider.

The Ajax daycare opened in Nov. 2017 and currently has a staff of 30 people.

Julie Gilchrist, Happy Kids' director, says she initially signed a five-year lease in 2017 with an option to renew for two more five-year terms. She told CP24.com on Friday that she tried to get a new lease before the July expiration but was unsuccessful.

The landlord, however, took issue with Gilchrist's description of the sequence of events in a statement.

"They want the lease to go from \$19,000 up to 24,000. That's ideally what they want in their term. I know I can never get that high," said Gilchrist, who initially paid a monthly rent of \$14,650. "It just doesn't work unless you raise your fees to \$400 or \$500 a week."

Worried about the pending expiration in July, Gilchrist says she asked her landlord, Elm Capital Ajax Inc., in June if she could get a new

lease that would see her rent go up to \$18,000. She claims that in addition to the rent increase, her landlord wanted her first to pay the \$40,000 debt she incurred during the COVID-19 pandemic in full before she could get a new lease.

"I said, so I have to pay you back the \$40,000 before I sign my lease? He said, 'you know what, we're just going to do a month-to-month,'" Gilchrist recalled.

"So I'm not thinking anything is weird because I pay my rent every month."

Despite the uncertainty, Gilchrist continued to pay rent, including for August, which jumped to \$19,000.

That's why Gilchrist was shocked when she received an email from her landlord earlier this month ordering her to vacate the property by Aug. 31.

"I don't know if they found somebody who can pay that much. But he was looking for somebody who could pay him up to \$24,000 in the five-year term," Gilchrist said, adding that the email "came out of left field," and that she felt blindsided and bullied by her landlord.

She tried to negotiate with them again to keep the doors of the daycare open and presented them with a payment plan, but she says they would not budge.

"I'm devastated about this. I literally have put every blood, sweat and tears into this place," Gilchrist said.

She says she then asked her landlord if they could let her stay for 60 to 90 days to give families more time to find another provider.

"People have already planned their work schedules in September," Gilchrist said. "It is going to be impossible for people to find alternatives in that short amount of time."

But the landlord refused, she says.

So, last Friday, Gilchrist finally let the families know about the situation.

"I let them know the circumstances, I let them know everything. I just figured I was going to be fully 110 per cent transparent. So, people could just understand that I didn't do this to be malicious," Gilchrist said.

"I didn't do this to be mean. And I feel awful. I feel awful about this."

Gilchrist says Happy Kids had just recently gone back to full capacity and for the first time since the pandemic hit, things feel normal at the daycare again.

"I went through everything during COVID. And I didn't know if I was going to be able to get this place back. I didn't know if I was going to be able to keep it above water. But I did," she said.

"(I just started to feel) really excited about things again, and then this happened."

In a statement to CP24.com, the property manager for Elm Ajax Plaza Inc. noted that end date for the lease was clearly set out in the contract and said that they reached out to Gilchrist about possible renewal as early as March 2022.

"Nothing ever materialized. For extra clarity, the (landlord) also advised Happy Kids that they will be seeking a new tenant, which they did," the statement read.

"On the topic of extra time, just prior to the expiry date Happy Kids requested that they be allowed to remain for an extra month, namely August 2022, and the (landlord) agreed. And while a reminder that vacant possession is required when the term ends on August 31 may have been sent week before last, any notion that this was a surprise to the tenant is simply not factual."

The property manager added that a new daycare will be taking over the space.

Gilchrist disputes the landlord's statement and says she plans take them to court.

Just like the other parents, Kristina Mojsoski was surprised by the announcement. Her two-year-old daughter is supposed to start at Happy Kids in September.

"I think I'm going to become more worried as the shock wears off. Because daycare and childcare are essential. And this is such short notice for us," Mojsoski said.

Her four-year-old son has been attending the daycare since he was 12 months old and will finish this month as he starts junior kindergarten in September. Mojsoski says she loves Happy Kids and trusts the staff, which is why she enrolled her daughter.

"So the fact now that I might have to look for somewhere new for my daughter is really uneasy," Mojsoski said.

She plans to return to work as a teacher next month but says she is unsure if that is still possible without childcare.

Mojsoski has messaged another daycare in the area but learned that there is a waitlist.

"I don't know what we're supposed to do. I need to go back to work," she said. "There's nobody to watch my daughter. I need to figure that out first. I just can't find a daycare just find one; you need to love it."

"I really hope that the centre did everything that they could. I trust that they did," Mojsoski added. "I have to trust that they did."

Meanwhile, parents have come together to spread awareness about the daycare's situation, hoping to stop its doors from closing.

Among them is Kate Dahlin, whose three-year-old daughter goes to the centre. She says she was stunned when she learned about the imminent closure.

"Not only is that just the horrible news, but the lack of notice and compassion for the families that rely on the daycare while we try to go to work," Dahlin said. "It's been enough disruption in the last two years. It's kind of another obstacle."

She says parents are sharing the news on social media and contacting local officials to bring attention to what is happening with the daycare.

"The owner feels like she's being bullied. And she's been very transparent with us with communications that she's had with the landlord. And it really sounds like she's right. And the way the landlord's going about this, it just isn't fair," Dahlin said.

The support she has received from the parents has been overwhelming for the daycare director. Gilchrist says it is a testament to how her daycare has become an important part of many children's lives.

"I created this space because I wanted it to be one of those places where people want to bring their kids. I wanted it to be clean. I wanted it to be bright and airy. And I've succeeded with that," she said.

When asked what she plans to do next, Gilchrist said, "I don't know. I'm hoping for a miracle."

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