

Why aren't inspection records public? [CA-BC] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS Using the Freedom of Information Act, The Vancouver Sun has made detailed inspection data for all licensed care facilities in the Lower Mainland available online for the first time. ... That raises an obvious question: Why isn't this stuff public already? After all, the region's two health authorities -- Fraser Health and Vancouver Coastal Health -- already make a considerable amount of inspection data available to the public on its websites. Restaurant inspections have been online for six years now. And Fraser Health recently put inspection summaries online for swimming pools, hairdressers and tattoo parlours. Yet when it comes to the places that take care of the most vulnerable people in our society -- children, the elderly and the disabled -- information is scarce. For example, before The Sun put inspection data up on its website this week, the only way to find out whether a daycare had a history of abuse was to file a formal Freedom of Information request, a process that could take months. NDP health critic Adrian Dix said it's ridiculous that the government currently puts inspection records for restaurants and hairdressers online, but not daycares and long-term-care facilities. ... Health authority officials interviewed by The Sun agreed that people have a right to know more about the quality of care being offered in the region's daycares and long-term-care facilities. "From our perspective, I think that we want as much transparency in the system as we can," said Tim Shum, regional manager of health protection for Fraser Health. However, officials say a combination of factors has slowed down the process of making inspection data public. Shum said posting restaurant inspections online was, to a large extent, a response to public demand. "We looked at the area where we tend to get more questions from the general public," he said. "And we do get more questions from the public about restaurants than we do about child care." Nick Losito, regional director of health protection for Vancouver Coastal, said privacy concerns have been another roadblock. "Right or wrong, there's a view that the information that relates to a restaurant has got less issues as far as protection of privacy than daycares and residential care facilities," said Losito. ... In February, Health Minister George Abbott ordered B.C.'s health authorities to make inspection data for long-term care facilities available online, as Ontario does already. Health authorities say that data should be available on their websites sometime this fall. However, the current plan is for the websites to post details only of each facility's most recent inspections. ... Inspection data for the region's 2,592 daycares will not be included, nor will the close to 446 specialized-care facilities like rehab centres and group homes for the disabled. In a phone interview this week, Abbott agreed that inspection records for daycares should be made public, too. "I would want to have the same level of transparency for child care facility inspections as we would have for long-term care facilities," he said. "Both are vulnerable populations and ... I don't know a good reason why we would not want to be more transparent than we are today around these issues." Abbott said he'd eventually like to see as much information as possible put online, not just inspection violations. However, he couldn't provide a firm date for when health authorities might put daycare inspection data online, or provide additional data for long-term care facilities like risk ratings and serious incidents. "I would like to see [that] optimistically in place by the end of of 2008 and hopefully, failing that, by the spring [of 2009]," he said. Abbott noted that the current risk-rating system is under review by his government and he would prefer to wait until a new system is in place before health authorities makes risk ratings public. While there is no hard evidence to prove it, Losito said putting restaurant inspections online appears to have encouraged some of the region's dirtier restaurants to clean up their acts -- because they know customers will find out if they don't. "It's another tool in our toolkit to get compliance," said Losito. And there is research to suggest the same thing could happen with daycares and long-term-care facilities. In 2004, Ann Dryden Witte, an economics professor at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, published a study looking at what happened in Broward County, Fla., after officials there began posting daycare inspection reports on the Internet. Using independent quality assessments prepared by a statewide agency, Witte compared the quality of daycare facilities in Broward County with those in neighbouring Miami-Dade, which did not post inspection reports online. According to Witte's study, the quality of daycare being offered in Broward improved substantially after the reports were put online -- outpacing daycares in Miami-Dade by a significant margin. Witte's study also found that inspectors in Broward County began inspecting facilities more often. "It affected both the inspectors and the providers," she said. Indeed, Witte's study found that the level of improvement in Broward County daycares from simply putting inspection data online was similar to what one would expect from more expensive measures like changing daycare curricula. Witte said what made Broward County's experiment work so well is that it made its website easy to use and then did a good job of advertising it, so that parents knew the data was available. Given Broward County's success, said Witte, she thinks other governments should make such inspection data public. ... "It can't help but bring up the marginal ones to a level of compliance -- either that or they go out of business over time," he said. However, Losito said it may take longer to see change among daycares and long-term-care facilities than in the restaurant sector. That's because the shortage of spaces means people often have little choice but to stick with a sub-standard facility. "With restaurants, a customer can choose to take their business elsewhere," said Losito. "That's really not the case with residential care ... [or] with daycares, when you've got long waiting lists." ... WANT TO FIND OUT HOW SAFE YOUR CHILD'S DAYCARE

IS? HERE'S HOW For the first time, Lower Mainland residents can now go online and quickly see the detailed inspection history for more than 3,000 care facilities across the region, including daycares, long-term care facilities and group homes for the disabled. The data, available at www.vancouversun.com/care/ [3] has not been easily accessible by the public before and, in some cases, could be accessed only through a formal Freedom of Information request. Using The Vancouver Sun's exclusive databases, you can: 1. Find out the risk rating, as of early 2008, for every licensed care facility in the region. Just type in the name of your child's daycare or mother's long-term care facility and you can instantly find out if it is considered a low, medium or high risk by health-authority inspectors. 2. Find daycares or long-term care facilities in your community that meet your specific needs, mapped out so you can see which ones are closest to your home or office. 3. Find out what health violations inspectors noted during their most recent visits to a facility. 4. See a list of all serious incidents -- such as abuse, neglect or medication errors -- reported to the health authority by each facility over the past several years. 5. See details on all the complaints made against a facility over the past few years, including whether health-authority inspectors believed each complaint was justified or not. 6. Use powerful search tools to learn more about particular issues at care facilities -- such as a list of all medication errors at nursing homes over the past five years. - reprinted from The Vancouver Sun

Region: British Columbia [4]

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