

Frozen fish, canned potatoes on menu at city daycares ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Andrea Ionescu, a middle-school teacher whose preschooler attends a city-run daycare near Greenwood and Danforth avenues in Toronto, told the city's government management committee about some scary stuff her preschool-age daughter has for lunch.

"They are serving frozen fish filets from China," she said during discussion today of a "proposed local and sustainable food procurement policy" for all city-run facilities.

"They get canned peaches from Greece, during Ontario's peach season, and canned pineapple from Thailand." Later Ms. Ionescu, a friendly and funny immigrant from Romania, added that the city daycare is serving frozen TV dinners, frozen fried eggs, boiled canned potatoes and canned flaked chicken.

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Ms. Ionescu, who has a degree in chemistry, said her daughter's daycare food first caught her eye when she was sitting with the children during snacks and noticed the cookies contained 4% trans fats.

"That's when I asked to go into the kitchen and that's when I saw that the sauce, the soup, the fruit, everything came from a can."

She fought and convinced Children's Services, which runs the city's daycares, to stop serving trans fats to the children. She and Karen Spector, a human rights lawyer who also has a child in a city daycare (and is expecting twins in July) met during deputations to city council about daycare food issues and formed, with other parents, the Better Daycare Food Network.

The City of Toronto feeds some 3,000 children in its 57 pricey, city-run daycare centres. Ms. Ionescu, who shops herself at the Big Carrot, a health food store on the Danforth, and at Whole Foods, said she waited 18 months to get her daughter into a city daycare, and that, even at about \$1,300 a month (for a toddler), she loves almost everything about the place.

"I did want my daughter to be educated by someone who is not overworked and underpaid," she says. "I'm very impressed with what my daughter has learned. She has learned table manners, to drop and roll if there's a fire, she's learned to sing and dance in multiple languages. It's a very pleasant atmosphere."

The problem, though, is the food. The women say they're stunned that, of \$67 a day they spend to put their kids in city daycare, less than \$3 a day goes toward food.

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"Canada is surrounded by ocean on three sides," added the teacher. "Who has more coastline than Canada? Why can't we feed our children Canadian fish?"

"We're dealing with children," adds Ms. Spector. "They are so vulnerable." She said that at YMCA daycares (which charge a toddler fee of \$52 a day) children eat food that is organic, local and natural.

Lorraine Bellisle, the dietary supervisor at the city's Children's Services, tells me that in fact the city spends \$2.68 per day on food at daycare centres that have a kitchen. Twelve daycares that don't have kitchens get catered food, which is about \$1 more per day.

"The menus meet the requirements of the Day Nurseries Act," Ms. Bellisle said. "We have a company that prepares our entrées for us. It's an inspected facility that offers a variety of nutritious foods."

"Yes we do have canned products when it's not in season, but where possible we would source Ontario fruits and vegetables. We have excellent ratings."

Ms. Ionescu won a small victory at her daycare recently, when she convinced staff to secretly buy local fresh potatoes using part of its office petty cash budget. And she's not giving up. "I immigrated to Canada. I want my child to eat Canadian," she says.

The committee, meanwhile, voted yesterday to send the report on buying a minimum amount of local food back to staff for more details on how much a "buy local" policy will cost. The report comes back to the July meeting.

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Region: Ontario ^[2]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7856> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/health>

[5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/legislation-and-regulation>