

Unregulated child care on the rise [CA-AB]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A shortage of licensed child-care spots in Alberta has fuelled an explosion of private, unregulated services - and complaints against them have doubled in just 12 months.

"In unregulated care, there's no monitoring, there's no agreed standards," said Maryann Bird, executive director of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada.

"There are real risks involved and that is bound to cause a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety for parents."

The number of licensed child-care places in Alberta fell from 41,000 in 2001 to 40,755 in 2003. Although the provincial government doesn't track the number of unregulated spots, just 11% of the province's preschool kids are enrolled in licensed child care. And complaints against unregulated services jumped from 43 in 2002 to 85 in 2003.

"We are in a crisis in this province, especially in the city of Edmonton," said Lana Sampson, executive director of Community Options, A Society for Children and Families, a non-profit group offering accredited care. "Parents should be scared to death of unlicensed child care."

Lynn Jerchel of Alberta Children's Services said officials are concerned about the drop in licensed care, but some unlicensed operators provide quality service. Only those caring for more than six kids in a home are required to be licensed.

Hannah Dam, owner of the Between Friends Daycare, 10638 Winterburn Rd., said licensed operators are struggling to make ends meet. There's a shortage of trained staff and the cost of meeting licensing standards means it's difficult to compete with unregulated operators, she said.

"Day care is getting so expensive and private services are always willing to go down on the dollars," said Dam, adding she charges \$440 a month for toddlers.

"If you can go private for \$300, then some will. It always concerns me."

Earlier this year, the Alberta government introduced subsidies to supplement the wages of qualified child-care workers. But Between Friends director Susan Davidson said that's just 30 cents an hour for staff with basic Level 1 training, many of whom only earn about \$7 an hour.

"It's really sad. I think you can probably go around collecting garbage and get more money than looking after children."

Gail Wiebe, who offers unlicensed child-care services from her south-side home, said she has been on CPR and first aid training courses to ensure the care she offers is safe.

"I went and got the child care and CPR, but I know one (unlicensed operator) that doesn't think it's that important."

- reprinted from Edmonton Sun

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