

Oldest daycare needs fresh set of solutions [CA-ON]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Take your blankie and your teddy bear and hit the road, kiddo. The oldest daycare centre in the country, in one of those grand old mansions on Jarvis Street, is on the verge of going bust.

Victoria Day Care opened in 1890. It has room for about 85 kids; its workers supervise another 80 home daycares scattered around town. At the moment, however, Victoria's doors are closed because daycare workers have been on strike for the past three months, and negotiations are going nowhere.

Actually, nobody seems to be aware there's a picket line in place except some of the parents, the kids who use the place and, for the first month or so, a couple of guys from a security firm who were paid to stand on guard and videotape the strikers.

What was the board afraid of?

Assault with a soother?

Half of the kids who used to use the place have been squeezed into home daycares elsewhere around the city, at great inconvenience for them and their families. As for the remainder of the kids, tough luck.

Typical is the situation faced by a student, a single mother with a three-year-old. The little one is autistic, isn't quite sure what's going on, and is upset as only an autistic kid can be; meanwhile, mom can't afford a babysitter and she's missing classes and -- well, the pair of them are lost in the shuffle.

The issue?

It's simple.

No other way to say it.

The board screwed up.

By way of background, bear in mind that daycare funding, which is pitiful in the first place, has been frozen for a long time; workers have not had a raise in... wait, that's not the main issue. This is:

The board of the Victoria Day Care hasn't had to make contributions to its employee pension plan for the past seven years. There's been a contribution holiday. You know how this works: When a pension fund does well, it generates a surplus; when there is a surplus, an employer is allowed to skim that surplus and use the money to fund its contribution to the pension plan. For some reason, the board of the Victoria Day Care neglected to plan for the day when the contribution holiday might come to an end. Instead of making contingency plans, they hid their heads under a pillow.

And then one day there was a reckoning, and the board discovered they were suddenly required to make a payment to the pension plan on behalf of their employees. But they didn't have the money because they hadn't planned ahead.

The cookie jar was empty.

What to do?

They sprung the news on the union during an insipid and protracted set of contract negotiations. They simply brought the issue to the table, gulped and said something like, "We're sorry, but we can't afford to pay the full amount of our contractually agreed-upon contribution to your pensions any more; how about if we drop our share from 5.6% to 1.5%? OK, let's make it 1.75%. Oh, hell, how about 2.25%, but that's our final offer; in other words, how about we cut your wages by 4%? And if that isn't acceptable, well, then, let's just wind the pension up."

Nice.

It's not as if pensions were a bargaining issue. The news was just dumped on the table with a sudden thud. The union went on strike.

On the picket line one recent morning, Mosez Kanatkin, who has worked at Victoria for several years, grumbled, "Daycare staff have never been asked to go to a board meeting. There are 500 parents using our services; none of them are on an advisory board. Nobody on the board of directors lives in the neighbourhood, or even has kids in the daycare."

Darlene Bullard is the vice-president of the board. She says Jarvis and Wellesley is a tough neighbourhood in which to find volunteers; most of the parents don't have the time to get involved. As for the pension fund goof, she says, "You could say we got caught with our pants down. It was quite a shock ... we just don't have the money."

Draw your own conclusions.

Use finger paint.

I don't mean to be cruel.

Daycare centres are underfunded; those who need the service the most are the ones who can afford it the least; those who can afford it don't want to pay what it's worth; and the government is happy to do nothing, primarily because you and I are passive enough to let the government get away with doing nothing.

Today's question:

Is there nobody in this town with the good will, the negotiating skills and the actuarial talents who can step forward and help the board of Victoria Day Care figure a way out of the mess they've created?

If not, Victoria will no longer be the oldest daycare in the country; it will merely be the latest to go belly up.

-Reprinted from The National Post

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