

Death by indifference ^[1]

The government's failure to build a child care system has again proved fatal

Author: Friendly, Martha

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Excerpts:

The story of a little girl's death in an unregulated Ontario child-care home is but one of too many such stories over the past 25 years. This tragedy is unambiguous evidence of the consequences of government failure to build a child-care system.

The media across Canada have featured photos of a sweet-faced toddler and the caregiver charged with second-degree murder -- face shrouded in a blue coat. Advice for parents is prominent and Ontario's child-care regulations are examined. But all this fails to tell the real story behind Duy-An Nguyen's heartbreaking death and her parents' grief.

The real story is found in the Toronto Star's archives. The past three decades saw a number of well-reported stories about other deaths in unregulated child care, most recently in 2010.

Each tragedy has led to public inquiries and inquests, editorials and evidence about why the public oversight of child care provided by good regulation is fundamental for basic safety.

A 1999 inquest jury looking into an infant's strangulation death at an unregulated home recommended that "the community and social services ministry initiate a full review of the Day Nurseries Act to provide safe and affordable daycare for children in Ontario."

The other part of the real story is in decades of news reports about long waiting lists, budget cuts, subsidy shortages, high fees and unfulfilled provincial and federal promises. Ontario governments have created many "initiatives" -- New Directions for Child Care, Child Care Reform and Best Start, to name a few. But for successive generations of children and families, these have not added up to much more than slogans and piecemeal solutions.

The statement of a mother who lost her child in unregulated care in 1999 still holds today: "Eighty per cent of children in this province are in unregulated daycare, but there's nothing to protect them.... The Day Nurseries Act only protects the 20 per cent of children whose parents can afford licensed daycare."

This is not to suggest that all children in unregulated home child care are at risk. Some children are well cared for by their grandmothers or other relatives while parents are at work.

But few people would seriously argue that finding a caregiver on the Internet or bulletin board offers parents who must go to work an acceptable "choice," especially if they're low-income or newcomers to Canada.

Most Canadian mothers with young children -- more than 70 per cent -- are in the labour force. Most have limited child-care choices. Mothers' labour force participation has been one of the most significant social shifts to occur in the past few decades but the child-care situation has not changed fundamentally since the 1980s.

What's missing is a child-care system with real options like those enjoyed by children and families in many other countries.

The provincial government must put in place a coherent plan for building a publicly managed early education and child-care system, the public funds -- provincial and federal -- to support it, and the political will to follow through.

This was spelled out by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which in 2004 encouraged provinces to develop plans for early childhood services "with clearly spelled-out goals, targets, timelines, responsibilities and accountability measures. Universal in intent, the plan should include annual targets and specific funding."

We don't lack the stories or recommendations -- there are too many of these. There is copious evidence that building a real child-care system is the right thing to do for children and families, education, the economy, health and safety, prosperity -- and a human right.

The governments of Ontario and Canada have both signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, committing to "ensuring that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities."

Surely we should be doing no less for children like Duy-An Nguyen and their families.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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