

Daycare series: Do you know where your children are? ^[1]

Unprecedented discovery at Surrey family daycare reveals weaknesses of licensing system

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EXCERPTS

When two licensing officers knocked on the door of the Grandview Heights family daycare in Surrey last fall, they were conducting a routine investigation. Both had previously inspected the facility in the 11 years it had been licensed, and knew its operator, Anna Calendino, from earlier visits.

Arriving mid-morning on Tuesday, Sept. 21, they were at first refused entry. Calendino, a mother of three in her 40s, appeared on the upstairs deck and said she had just had an inspection in March, and besides, she was closed for the day. The officers explained they were following up on complaints from two parents who alleged, among other things, that more than seven kids - the number permitted by her licence - were attending.

Calendino repeated that no children were present, but when pressed, relented. After a brief delay she let them in, the house noticeably absent of the usual sounds of kids at play.

While one officer headed upstairs, the other made her way to a door that appeared to lead to the garage. As she turned the knob and pushed, the door was slammed and someone yelled, "Get out of here! You can't come in here; it's a private suite." But one glimpse had been enough.

There, sitting on play mats or in high chairs, watching a muted TV, were the children the officers were looking for.

Twenty-four of them.

What they found

That Calendino, who also goes by her married name, Annamaria Piccolo, was caring for 17 more kids than the legal limit was only one of the ways she was contravening B.C.'s Child Care Licensing Regulation (CCLR). Her infractions led to an immediate suspension of her licence, then its cancellation in October. The investigation report, obtained under a freedom-of-information request from the Fraser Health Authority, paints a picture of consistent, conscious and long-term flouting of the rules.

Of the seven kids the licence permits, for instance, only four can be younger than four, with only two under two. Seventeen of the 24 kids found by officers were between one and three.

Also, staff must have completed 20 hours of training, a basic first-aid certification and a criminal-record check. Calendino's helpers were undocumented and unqualified.

The converted garage in which the kids were found had never been inspected for daycare purposes, and Calendino claimed that until December 2009 it had housed her mother-in-law. But investigators established she had been using it for daycare since 2003.

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"With no attendance records a child could easily be missed or overlooked in an emergency situation," the report stated. Also, "[officers] had serious concerns .. that children would not be able to be evacuated in a timely manner."

In addition, Calendino lied about the children's files, initially saying they were locked in a safe she couldn't access, then producing two binders: one with seven kids' files and a second with 25 other kids' files, for a total enrolment of 32. The investigation found, however, that at least four children attending were undocumented, bringing the total to 36.

The business must have been highly lucrative. A standard daycare operating five days a week and charging the average fee of \$38 per day would gross, at most, about \$69,000 a year.

Calendino, who operated Tuesday to Friday, was charging \$55 a day by 2010. If she routinely cared for 24 children, she would have been making \$1,320 a day. That's about \$275,000 a year.

According to the report, which reconstructed monthly enrolment based on parent interviews, the daycare had been egregiously over capacity - catering to between 13 and 25 children in any given month - for at least two years. And it had been consistently over capacity for at least five.

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How it worked

The two-storey home at 16667 24th Ave., where Calendino has lived with her engineer husband Vince and their three school-aged kids since 1996, lends itself to such a scheme. The chalet-style house, screened from neighbours' view by trees and overgrown bushes, sits well back from the road, overlooking a gated, circular drive.

Large picture windows aided in the operation of a kind of child valet service. Parents would park, and by the time they reached the door their child would be waiting, dressed and ready to go.

Off that entryway was a door that obscured the bulk of the daycare from view. Calendino told parents that to minimize disruption, she preferred they remain in the hall. To limit parental crossover, Calendino gave strict fifteen-minute windows for drop-off and pickup.

Even so, at times parents couldn't help but notice there were nine cars in the driveway.

The logistics of such an enterprise are daunting. If even half of the children weren't toilet-trained, the daycare must have produced upward of 140 dirty diapers per week. Lunch, drinks and snacks, all provided by parents, must have been served in shifts, as most kids were too young to feed themselves.

It's hard to imagine where programming would have fit in; a trip to the backyard on a sunny day would have required 24 hats and applications of sunscreen. When officers discovered the children last fall, half had been sucking on soothers.

Diane Bellesen, chair of the B.C. Family Child Care Association and a 17-year operator of a family daycare in Surrey, said, "How [Calendino] managed to care for 17 children of those ages is absolutely beyond me. No matter what anybody says, you can't give quality care to 17 children between two people."

Bellesen, who called the case "unprecedented," has been told by former Grandview Heights parents that most had an inkling of what was going on.

"Everybody knew she had more," she said, "but they didn't realize she had that many more. It was kind of a running joke - 'Wow, today it's a real traffic jam here.'"

But the real concern was safety, Bellesen noted. "If there was a fire, how do you get that many little ones, many of whom aren't going to be walking, out of the house safely? ... If there was an injury ... how do you deal with that effectively when one person is left to take care of 24 children?"

She also points out that the operator's liability insurance would have been void. "We carry insurance in case something tragic happens ... but if we are not in compliance, it's not covered," Bellesen said.

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A pattern emerges

"I can tell you this is unusual," said Roy Thorpe-Dorward, spokesman for the Fraser Health Authority, which regulates 703 licensed family daycares from Burnaby to White Rock to Hope.

In the last two calendar years, only five other licences have been cancelled, none because of capacity violations.

Grandview Heights, in the course of 10 unscheduled annual inspections since 1999, had always received a low-hazard rating. But there were minor incidents that, with hindsight, point to a pattern.

As early as July 2004, licensing received a complaint from a parent who said she'd observed eight children in care and two extra staff. At the followup inspection, Calendino denied being over capacity and explained she had just hired two part-time staff.

Two-hour routine inspections are unscheduled, Thorpe-Dorward explained, so officers can observe a typical day. But such drop-in inspections in March of 2007 and 2008 found, surprisingly, no children present at all. In both cases the officers scheduled later appointments to observe Calendino's programming. At those appointments, fewer than seven children were present.

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"Twenty-two parents [of 28 interviewed] were happy with the care given, and felt ... the staff had a genuine love for the children."

Three parents voiced concerns about programming or lack of compassion dealing with toileting accidents. One had wondered if the kids were being adequately supervised. Three said they'd removed their kids over concerns about numbers or lack of programming.

How did they feel about the revelation that 24 kids had been found? "Eleven parents expressed how upset, shocked, surprised and deceived they felt," says the report. Three felt they hadn't got what they'd paid for. Three expressed serious concerns about the effects on and safety of their children.

Twenty-three parents acknowledged they knew the daycare was over capacity, but hadn't realized to what extent.

Future concerns

Calendino declined to be interviewed for this story. During the investigation, she dismissed parents' complaints as malicious and accused officers of vilifying her. She refused to supply invoices or tax receipts. (According to one parent, Calendino gave her a receipt under her own name rather than that of her business.)

The report concluded, "You have chosen to wilfully disregard the regulations and operate the facility in a manner that has the potential to have a serious negative impact on the health and safety of children in care." Calendino was found to have contravened two sections of the Community Care and Assisted Living Act (CCALA) and 13 sections of the CCLR.

On Oct. 20, her licence was cancelled, the harshest penalty available under the CCALA.

"If she reapplied [for a licence]," Thorpe-Dorward said, "she'd have to begin at the beginning." The agency would take her history into consideration in making their decision.

Asked if Calendino could open an unlicensed daycare, he said, "It would be entirely possible. There would be a maximum of two children [not her own], or three or more if they're family members. There's no indication for licensing if it falls within those limits."

In fact, Calendino inquired about reopening during the investigation - both with a licence elsewhere, and without, as a licence-not-required (LNR) daycare. When she asked what would happen if she cared for more than the two children indicated, she was told, "We might get the police involved and there will be fines."

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Bellesen, whose organization consults with government to develop standards of practice, said this case undermines the credibility of other family-daycare providers.

But it also highlights other problems, she noted. One is a lack of parent education: "After hearing about this and talking to these parents, they said, 'We had no idea. We just relied on our sisters and our neighbours telling us it's a wonderful place ... and now we're horrified that we didn't educate ourselves.'"

The other, larger issue, she said, is the non-regulation of B.C.'s thousands of unlicensed daycares, which can be run by someone with no training.

By law, anyone caring for three or more kids must be licensed. "But nobody other than the [Child Care Resource and Referral programs] ... is watching," Bellesen said. "We know of people who have 10, 12, 14 children and operate as an LNR. Licensing can only go where there is a complaint, so it's very frustrating for us."

"Parents can go on Craigslist and there are all kinds of [unlicensed daycares] on there.... And, you know, if [operators] don't follow the regulations, you're up a creek."

- reprinted from The Vancouver Sun

Region: British Columbia ^[2]

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