

Case raises concerns over 'stranger care': Abandoned kids highlight unlicensed facilities ^[1]

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Source: Winnipeg Free Press

Format: Article

Publication Date: 4 Jun 2013

EXCERPTS:

One week ago, six young children were left alone at an unlicensed daycare -- in the same kind of "stranger care" an estimated 24,000 children are receiving in Manitoba.

"We should be scared," said Pat Wege, executive director of the Manitoba Child Care Association, after an unnamed 33-year-old daycare operator was arrested last week for leaving six kids between the ages of one and five.

"There is no watchdog when it comes to unlicensed child care, other than parents," she said.

Police said the daycare operator was released on her own recognizance but did not say whether any charges -- such as child abandonment -- had been laid. Her daycare is no longer operational, police said earlier.

"There's plenty of outrage, there's just no accountability," Wege said. "Unfortunately, it takes something happening for people to wake up and say 'How was this allowed?' "

There are no demographic data gathered but it's estimated half of the 113,7000 children with a mom working outside the home are in the unlicensed care of a relative, friend or neighbour, she said.

The other half are turning to "stranger care," said Wege. A total of 32,000 are getting licensed daycare and another 24,000 "children are going somewhere."

"In the absence of any reliable demographic information, that's a lot of babysitters unregulated," said Wege. "My organization has raised this as a concern many times over the years as demand for child care has increased."

As of March 31, 10,708 kids in Manitoba were waiting for a daycare space, with more than 8,700 in Winnipeg, the online child-care registry said.

"How many are in unlicensed homes that provide child care inside or outside the law?" Wege asked. "We know how many more nurses and doctors we need and how many nursing-home beds but we don't keep track of this," said Wege. "All we're left with is having to make some guesses." Child care doesn't get the same kind of attention as care for the elderly, she said.

"When my parents needed it, I didn't have to go looking for eldercare on the bulletin board at Safeway," said Wege.

"I'd probably stop working before I'd do that," said Maegan Clerihew, mother of two-year-old Sylora. She said her husband, Matt McBurney, registered for child care when Clerihew was four months pregnant. When a spot at the daycare in their area opened up in September, "it felt like winning the lottery," Clerihew said.

The province said it has more than doubled its annual investment in early learning and child care over the last decade. More than 200 affordable, high-quality child-care spaces became available in the province in the last two months alone with the opening of five new and expanded centres. These are the first of up to 26 new and expanded centres announced in the 2013 budget, a spokesman said by email Monday.

There is no legislative requirement for private child-care homes to be licensed if they have no more than four children under age 12, including the children of the care provider, he said. A "compliance/investigations and resource analyst" has been hired to give the province a greater ability to investigate complaints about unlicensed child-care homes and act more quickly.

The unlicensed sector is thriving because demand for child care is so high, Wege said. She said she hopes unlicensed child-care providers get the message.

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Region: Manitoba ^[2]

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