

Ontario child care review needed in wake of tot's death ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The death of a toddler this week in a Vaughan home providing unregulated daycare is a symptom of Ontario's lack of a comprehensive policy to guide the care and education of young children while parents work or study, experts say.

"The bottom line is we do not have an accessible, affordable child-care system that provides quality options for families," said Martha Friendly, of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, an early childhood education and child care policy research body in Toronto.

"As long as we are content to leave the care of our youngest children to market forces, we are going to see cases like this," she said.

With licensed care available for just over 20 per cent of the province's children under age 12, and the vast majority of mothers with young children in the workforce, unregulated care will continue to proliferate, Friendly said.

"We build new subdivisions, but no one is planning for child care the way we plan for schools or sewers," she said. "We don't see child care as a public good or a public service. And that is the core problem."

"The Ontario government needs to do a full review of the child care situation," she said.

Paramedics found a lifeless toddler early Monday evening in a two-storey brick house near Dufferin St. and Highway 407. There were 27 children in the home being cared for by three adults when the tot perished, health officials said. The home was closed later that day for failing a health inspection and for hosting too many kids.

Under the Day Nurseries Act, it is an offence for an unlicensed child care provider to care for more than five unrelated children under 10 without a licence - regardless of how many adults are present.

The provincial education ministry, which is responsible for child care is reviewing the Day Nurseries Act as part of its plan to "modernize" child care in the wake of full-day kindergarten for 4- and 5-year olds, said a spokesperson for Education Minister Liz Sandals.

Earlier this year, the province released a child-care policy framework, "which sets out a vision for a responsive, high-quality, accessible, and increasingly integrated early years system that better supports Ontario's children and families," said Lauren Ramey.

However, Friendly says the framework doesn't say how or when the province intends to deliver on that vision.

This week's death is every working parent's nightmare, says Toronto mother Tiffany Jarvis.

"I just can't imagine it. A daycare should be the second-safest place for your child, next to your own home," says Jarvis, 36, who works full time as a grocery store clerk.

So far, Jarvis's fiancé, Kevin Longo, has been caring for their 22-month-old son, Dante, while working part-time. But when Longo returns to full-time work in the fall, the couple will need full-time care. Jarvis admits they are worried.

"We are just starting to look now and I know there are long waiting lists everywhere," she said. "And with the cost, we're wondering if it is even worth it for (Longo) to go back to work full time."

The couple may qualify for a daycare subsidy. But with more than 21,000 Toronto children waiting for subsidies, their son could be in school before he gets one.

One way to tackle the problem of unregulated care is for all home-based child care to be licensed, says the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, a provincial advocacy group that supports high-quality, affordable child care in non-profit centres and homes for all families who need it.

"We can figure out how to exempt Grandma. But anyone who is doing home child care as a business ought to be licensed," said spokesperson Andrea Calver.

Homes that provide regulated care are overseen by licensed home child care agencies that visit homes to ensure quality and provide support, training and even toys. They refer children to caregivers and handle fee payment from parents who may also be eligible for subsidies.

There is no oversight for unregulated home child care, which the province considers a private arrangement parents make with caregivers.

Regulating all home child care would help address the shortage of licensed care, says Elaine Baxter-Trahair, of Toronto's children's services division, which oversees about 57,000 licensed child care spots in centres and homes.

But without an over-arching provincial policy with goals and a way to measure progress, bringing more unregulated home daycares into the licensed system doesn't make sense, Baxter-Trahair said.

"Is more home child care what we need? You need a mix, and it can't be at the expense of group care. Is it in the right area? Are there enough early childhood educators to support it? There are a lot of issues," she said.

"We need to have a clear vision of where we see child care going province-wide," she said. "And the reality is that quality does require an investment."

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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