

Ministry of Education staffers suspended after toddler's death at unlicensed Vaughan daycare ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Two Ministry of Education staffers have been suspended in the wake of a toddler's death at an unlicensed daycare in Vaughan, the Star has learned.

While the names of the employees are being kept secret due to "human resource issues," sources say the suspensions are due to a failure to follow up on earlier complaints of overcrowding at the home-based operation.

That revelation comes as Ontario Ombudsman André Marin on Monday formally launched "a systemic investigation" into how the Ministry of Education responds to public concerns about unlicensed daycare providers.

"I was . . . horrified to learn . . . of the death of the two-year-old girl at the unlicensed daycare in Vaughan," Premier Kathleen Wynne told reporters at Queen's Park.

"It's unacceptable that complaints against this daycare were not followed up. My heart goes out to the family.

"There's an internal investigation going on as well as the coroner's investigation. Disciplinary action has been taken - and if there's more then that will be done," the premier warned.

Insiders say the sanctions against the two unionized workers were taken last week after Education Minister Liz Sandals publicly indicted her own department for falling short.

"I learned earlier today that the ministry did not respond to all previous complaints made against this unlicensed provider, as is the normal policy of the ministry," Sandals said in a statement Thursday night.

"This is clearly unacceptable, and I have directed my deputy minister, George Zegarac, to conduct a detailed examination of this incident as well as related ministry processes."

While there are laws dictating that an unlicensed home daycare is allowed to have a maximum of five children under the age of 10 who are not related to the operator, there were 27 kids at the Vaughan facility when the coroner arrived on July 8.

It is not known if all of them were enrolled in the daycare at the time. The cause of the little girl's death has not been determined.

The Vaughan daycare was the subject of three complaints to the ministry late last year, but only the second one - in November - led to a visit from provincial inspectors.

Marin, who had started a preliminary probe into the issue on Friday, said his Special Ombudsman Response Team (SORT) will try to determine whether further tragedies can be prevented. "In view of the high level of public interest in proceeding with this case, I have directed SORT to complete the fact-finding stage of the investigation within the next 90 days," he said in a statement.

The provincial watchdog requested anyone with relevant information to contact him at 1-800-263-1830, file an online complaint at www.ombudsman.on.ca ^[2] or email his office at info@ombudsman.on.ca ^[3].

He was summoned to intervene Friday in a letter from NDP MPP Monique Taylor (Hamilton Mountain).

His investigators are looking at the ministry's "monitoring and enforcement relating to unlicensed child care settings."

Taylor said Monday she is "pleased the ombudsman has decided to launch an investigation into whether the Liberal government is adequately protecting children in unlicensed home-based daycares."

"When leaving a child in another's care, parents should be confident that their child is safe," Taylor said in a statement.

"Oversight of the well-being of our children is paramount, because a child's daycare must not be a dangerous place. I look forward to the ombudsman's conclusions and recommendations."

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[4]

Tags: unregulated ^[5]

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