

Parents can access unlicensed daycare complaints ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

TORONTO - The provincial government has pledged to make all complaints against unlicensed daycares available online in a searchable database so parents can learn if their caregiver has been taking in more children than the legal limit.

"It is important for parents to have access to as much information as possible when making decisions about child care options," Education Minister Liz Sandals wrote in a statement Thursday after meeting with the Information and Privacy Commissioner. "The ministry will provide information on request regarding unlicensed child care providers who are found to be caring for more than five children under the age of 10 without a Day Nursery Licence."

"Over the longer term, the ministry will also put in place a searchable online function that will enable parents to access this information directly," she wrote.

After 2-year-old Eva Ravikovich was found dead at an overcrowded unlicensed home daycare in Vaughan last month, it came to light that the government had been enforcing a double standard when releasing information about complaints.

Licensed daycares are required to post reports after any injury or complaint for 10 business days, and the government makes those reports available for two years afterward. But complaints against unlicensed home daycares - which care for an estimated 80 per cent of children in the province - were being kept secret due to "privacy concerns."

Shortly after the death, Education Minister Liz Sandals said that parents would have to file a Freedom of Information request - a time-consuming and potentially costly procedure - to find out if their child's unlicensed daycare had been the subject of a complaint.

This prompted the provincial Privacy Commissioner Ann Cavoukian to write to the Toronto Star, castigating the government for "hiding behind privacy."

Cavoukian later specified that there shouldn't be privacy concerns when releasing complaint reports against unlicensed daycares.

After meeting with Cavoukian Thursday, Sandals said the reports will be made available immediately.

With a phone call to their local Child Care Quality Assurance and Licensing Office, parents can now find out if there's ever been a complaint made against an unlicensed daycare, and whether any action was taken.

"Absolutely, it's great that parents can now access that information," said Don Giesbrecht, CEO of the Canadian Child Care Federation. "Because it made no sense that it was there for the licensed daycares but not there for the unlicensed."

Giesbrecht would like to see the government embark on a public education campaign to help parents make wise decisions about their child care providers.

Parents should check for the number of children, he said. They should also look for fire exits and ensure staff have first aid and CPR training. Parents should also ask staff for a criminal record check.

"These are the basics of custodial care," he said. "But there's no law requiring any of this for unlicensed daycares."

"This is where your children are spending eight to nine hours a day, every day of the week. You've got to ask the tough questions," he said.

The Education Ministry, which oversees all daycares in the province, has been reviewing the Day Nurseries Act for over a year.

Currently, the government posts detailed annual inspection reports for all licensed child-care centres online. It plans to add "serious occurrence notification forms," which are filled out after any injury or complaint, to the searchable database soon.

Once the technology is in place, complaints from unlicensed daycares will be included in the online database.

These complaint reports, however, are limited to reporting if the daycare has exceeded the maximum number of children allowed. The ministry does not inspect for anything else in an unlicensed daycare.

That's why some groups think the ministry should to add more regulation to the unlicensed daycare sector.

"Right now, there are basically no rules," said Andrea Calver of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

Calver says anyone who cares for unrelated children and gets paid for it should be required to affiliate with an agency that inspects them

and reports to the government.

"Anything less than that would continue the status quo, which is a small regulated child-care system combined with a massive, unregulated shadow child-care system," she said. "And I'm not sure parents can tell the difference."

-reprinted from the Waterloo Record

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