

Parents had no idea daycare had too many kids ^[1]

Author: Oved, Marco Chown & Ballingall, Alex

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EXCERPTS:

For many mothers in Greater Toronto's Russian community, the home daycare on Yellowwood Circle in Vaughan seemed like the perfect child-care solution.

It was inexpensive, open long hours, featured a Russian speech therapist, cooked Russian meals and would even pick up and drop off your kids at no extra cost.

So it came as a shock in early July when 2-year-old Eva Ravikovich was found dead at the daycare. Police would find 27 kids on the premises that day.

The cause of Eva's death is still unknown and no charges have been laid in the case.

The Star spoke to nine mothers who had children in the daycare run by Olena Panfilova, her husband Oleksandr Rabadanov and their daughter. Many of these women asked not to be named for fear of being ostracized by the Russian community.

They described a high-quality daycare tailored to the Russian community's needs and were stunned to learn they had been ignorant of the number of children in care.

They pointed to several unusual policies: parents said they were not allowed inside, that children were shuttled back and forth between the daycare and the adjacent house, and that they were asked to pay upfront for an entire year.

The province estimates 80 per cent of children in Ontario are enrolled at unlicensed home daycares, which aren't subject to inspections or oversight. It's legal to run an unlicensed daycare in Ontario so long as the caregiver is minding a maximum of five children under the age of 10, not including their own.

All nine parents who spoke to the Star said Panfilova charged between \$6,600 and \$7,200 per child per year. The more you paid up front, the cheaper it was. In any case, it was always much cheaper than other unlicensed home daycares in the community, said Alisa Fulshtinsky, who runs an online group of 800 Russian mothers called Toronto Mommies.

Fulshtinsky has come in contact with many parents who had children in Panfilova's daycare through her group, though her own children are not enrolled.

"Are you aware of how cheap this daycare was?" she said. "She was driving (the kids) home. A lot of parents don't have cars. . . . That was her target audience. And she knew how to work it very well.

"You have to understand the Russian mentality. We're not supposed to ask questions - especially women."

Eva's death sent shock waves through the community. Fulshtinsky described how Russian language online forums like Toronto Mommies blew up with anger, finger-pointing and accusations.

"Is it a wake-up call? Absolutely!" Fulshtinsky said.

Many parents believe the death was an accident and Panfilova did nothing wrong.

"I don't think she did anything on purpose," said Stanislava Grinevitch, whose son attended the daycare last fall. "The other mommies never said anything bad about her."

When York Region Public Health shut the daycare down the day of Eva's death, it reported that 35 kids were enrolled.

"I never even questioned how many kids she had," said Grinevitch, who toured the house before deciding to send her son.

The tour was conducted on a weekend, when no children were present. With big play rooms in the basement and on the main floor and no more than six cribs in the bedrooms upstairs, "it looked better than all the unlicensed daycares I had seen," she said.

After the tour, Grinevitch said, she was never again allowed back into the house.

Five mothers the Star spoke to described a policy of not letting parents into the house. When they came to the door, they said Panfilova told them strangers would disturb the children, or that kids were sleeping, and they would have to wait until their child came out.

Those parents allowed inside said it was only with advance notice.

Property records show that Panfilova and Rabadanov own the house at 343 Yellowwood Circle, which was entirely devoted to the daycare. Panfilova told parents her family lived next door at 345, but seven mothers suspected that both houses were being used for child care.

No one answered the door at the daycare on Thursday, though a young woman with a toddler answered at 345. When asked about the allegations, she simply said: "You need to leave."

A woman who refused to identify herself later called the number left at the house and gave a statement on behalf of Panfilova.

She denied parents weren't allowed in the house and that they were asked to pay up front. She said it isn't true that children were shuttled between the two houses.

Olga Kosogor previously told the Star she paid Panfilova \$6,600 for a year of child care shortly before Eva's death. Like several other parents, she called asking for a refund after the daycare was shut down.

But when she showed up to collect her money, Panfilova only had \$1,200, she said. When Kosogor demanded the rest of her money, the discussion became heated and police were called.

Kosogor said she was detained for five hours but not charged in the incident.

With files from Alex Consiglio and Jane Gerster

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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