

Premiers urged to make daycare a priority at annual conference

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EXCERPTS:

Canadian child care advocates are urging the premiers at their annual meeting this week to make safe, affordable, quality child care a national priority.

In the wake of two recent child deaths and one alleged poisoning in unlicensed Ontario daycares, the Canadian Child Care Federation and the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada are calling on the premiers to work together on a "pan-Canadian" plan.

The premiers should also push Ottawa to play its "appropriate financial and policy roles" to ensure children and families have access to this essential social support, they say in their open letter delivered to the premiers Wednesday.

"We urge you - as the leaders responsible for social programs - to use your annual meeting to commit to develop a collective strategy to resolve Canada's child-care crisis," the letter says.

With most mothers with young families in the workforce or studying, and only enough licensed care for 20 per cent of children under age 5, Canada is woefully underserved, the groups say.

As a result, parents are forced to leave their children in unregulated and sometimes unsafe settings, a situation not imposed on older children in elementary or secondary school, they write.

This week, Waterloo Regional Police charged a former home daycare provider with two counts of aggravated assault and administering a noxious substance after a toddler was rushed to hospital in March.

Earlier this month, a Toronto toddler was found dead in an unlicensed Vaughan home daycare.

On July 4, a two-year-old girl drowned in the bathtub of her North York care-giver's home.

"These deaths are only the tip of an unregulated child care iceberg," the advocates say. "Without a real system of early childhood education and child care, Canada will continue to fail its children and families - and thus ultimately the country."

In the early 2000s, provinces were working with Ottawa on a \$5 billion national daycare system, said Don Giesbrecht, head of the Canadian Child Care Federation, which represents the sector's child-care professionals.

But since the Harper government came to power in 2006 and cancelled the national plan, Ottawa has "washed its hands of the issue," he said.

"Unfortunately, the provinces seem to have let it go without a whimper," he said in an interview. "This is a national issue that affects the majority of Canadian families. Let's make this sure we have standards, processes and funding in place to support a quality system across Canada."

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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