

Ontario seeking more power over unregulated daycare ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The Ontario government does not track public health inspections of unregulated daycares, like the one that found potentially deadly listeria bacteria in a Vaughan home where a toddler died this summer.

Nor are provincial officials automatically informed when complaints to Children's Aid, animal control, municipal property standards, fire or police services result in warnings, fines or charges against unlicensed home daycare operators.

The education ministry, which oversees licensed daycare in the province, has no jurisdiction over unregulated home child care businesses unless a person is caring for more than five unrelated children under age 10 - and only then if someone complains.

"In cases where they have observed more than five children . . . public health, Children's Aid or the police may make the ministry aware of actions taken regarding an unlicensed home daycare," said a spokesperson for Education Minister Liz Sandals on Friday.

But there is no provincial requirement for these agencies to provide this information.

"This is part of the reason why we are actively working on better inter-agency co-operation and we will continue this work over the fall and winter," Lauren Ramey said in a statement.

"We will be working with other ministries on tools and resources to support collaboration at the provincial and local level."

York Region public health officials have said at least 35 children were registered for daycare in the home where 2-year-old Eva Ravikovich died July 8.

In addition to listeria in a chicken stew, cooked grains and deli meat in the unregulated Vaughan home, health inspectors found expired food in the fridge and freezer, dirty diapers and garbage in the kitchen, and no sign of proper hand-washing or sanitation of toys.

The coroner has not yet determined a cause of death in the case, but has ruled out food poisoning or infectious disease.

The public health report also noted there were 14 dogs in the home next door, where nine children were found and were apparently also being cared for by the operator.

Vaughan city bylaws limit the number of dogs to three per home. Animal services officers "continue to work with the owner to relocate/re-house some of the dogs," a city spokesperson said in an email.

"The dogs are all small-breed dogs," said Anne Winstanley. "Additionally, there are no concerns regarding care or condition of any of the dogs."

Due to a lawsuit launched by Eva's parents last month, Sandals said she could not comment on the contents of the public health report obtained under a Freedom of Information request and revealed in the Star Friday.

But she said her ministry is acting.

"The government is reviewing the Day Nurseries Act to strengthen the safety and quality of child-care options for families," she said in a statement.

"We are bringing forward legislative amendments that will, if passed, expand the authority of the ministry to address complaints related to unlicensed child care providers," she added.

As previously announced, the ministry is setting up a special enforcement team and establishing a searchable database of verified complaints to help parents looking for care in the unregulated sector.

A new assistant deputy minister responsible for unlicensed child care has been appointed to oversee this work, Ramey said.

Only about 20 per cent of the province's children younger than 12 have access to licensed child care. That means the vast majority of children are cared for in unregulated settings while their parents work or study.

The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, which made the FOI request for the public health report, is calling on the government to license all people who run child-care businesses from their homes.

"We simply can't have people looking after children as a business without being licensed," said Andrea Calver. "There has to be rules."

Somebody has to inspect. And providing support for providers is a really important aspect to this, too."

But tackling problems in unregulated home child care is just one part of the daycare dilemma, said child care expert Martha Friendly, who runs the Toronto-based Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

"It needs to be part of a larger child care system, which right now, Ontario doesn't have," she said.

"All levels of government need to collaborate to transform child care from the current unplanned, market-based, parent-funded care patchwork to publicly managed, publicly funded child-care systems so that eventually parents won't need to find their children's care on the Internet or a supermarket bulletin board," she added.

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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