

# Daycare crisis: Halton health complaints show gaps in unlicensed care <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** Toronto Star

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 7 Oct 2013

## EXCERPTS:

Public health complaints to five unregulated home daycares in Halton Region over the past two-and-a-half years highlight gaps in oversight of health and safety for children in unlicensed care.

Records of the complaints obtained by the Star show children in three Oakville and Burlington homes may have been exposed to a host of health and safety hazards, including a backyard pool, a rodent infestation and other unsanitary conditions.

But regional health officials admit they don't know for sure, because inspectors routinely refer complaints about unregulated daycares to the province - even though Education Minister Liz Sandals acknowledges her ministry has no power to investigate or close these homes for health violations. Under provincial legislation, these daycares are only governed by one rule: no more than five unrelated children under age 10.

"They are the lead agency for dealing with these complaints," said Matt Ruf, director of health protection for Halton Region, confirming his agency did not visit three of the five sites flagged for health and safety concerns by the public.

Under the Day Nurseries Act, the province has no jurisdiction over unregulated home child-care businesses, unless the operator is caring for more than five unrelated children under age 10 - and then only if someone complains.

"I would fully expect them to be phoning Children's Aid or to phone us back (if there's a health concern)," said Ruf. "I don't think their staff would just walk away and say: 'Well, they've got enough kids. It's fine.' ... If they need our assistance, obviously we would be there."

The revelations come in the wake of a startling York Public Health report that found potentially deadly listeria in a chicken stew, cooked grains and deli meat in an illegal Vaughan home daycare that was inspected when a toddler died there in July. At least 35 children were registered for care at the unregulated home. Nine children and 14 dogs were found at the caregiver's house next door that day.

The coroner, who has not yet determined a cause of death, has ruled out food poisoning and infectious disease.

As for the Halton complaints, one of the home daycares had already closed by the time inspectors visited, two operations were referred to Children's Aid, three to the province, and one to Oakville bylaw officials, according to the FOI report obtained by the Star. In the fifth case, public health officials provided "education" on proper hygiene and hand washing.

It's impossible to know the extent of health and safety concerns in unregulated home daycares because no one is checking, said Andrea Calver with the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

"You could have very well-meaning caregivers who don't even know they are not washing their hands properly," said Calver. "No one would ever find out until something happened, because there is no licensed agency inspecting or providing support to these caregivers on a regular basis."

Calver was particularly alarmed about the home with a pool, which Oakville bylaw officers found to be acceptable, because the yard has a perimeter fence. Licensed home daycare agencies won't accept caregivers with pools because the risks are just too great, she noted.

The coalition and other child-care advocates are urging Queen's Park to change the Day Nurseries Act to ensure that all home child-care businesses are regulated by licensed agencies.

As reported earlier in the Star, the Ontario government does not track public health inspections of unregulated daycares, 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 operators.

As a result, Education Minister Liz Sandals' promised online database of verified complaints against unregulated operators can only alert parents when daycares have been caught with too many kids.

That makes it tricky for parents who want information about the health record of unlicensed daycares. In Durham, York and Toronto, for example, the public can't know about complaints or investigations at unregulated homes unless they file an FOI, while a spokesperson from Peel Region said health officials will simply refer inquiries to the education ministry, which doesn't track the information.

A spokesperson for Sandals has said the province is working on "better interagency co-operation" and considering legislative amendments to "expand the authority of the ministry to address complaints related to unlicensed child care providers."

All GTA public health officials said they inform the Ministry of Education of complaints against unregulated home daycares.

Ruf said Halton doesn't learn the outcomes of complaints it refers to other agencies, but he still expects them to be investigated.

"That's par for the course when we refer anything over," he said. "We don't always get to close the loop, unfortunately."

In regulated home daycares and licensed centres, there are regular inspections and any health or safety complaint is posted in the facility to inform parents. Results of the complaint, and any action taken, are also posted in a prominent location.

Centres are inspected at least once a year by ministry officials. Licensed home daycare agencies are required to visit their caregivers every three months, but many agencies check up more often. Family Day Care Services, the largest non-profit home daycare agency in the GTA, which oversees about 285 homes, makes monthly visits to ensure health and safety and other quality measures are being followed.

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** quality <sup>[3]</sup>

health <sup>[4]</sup>

unregulated <sup>[5]</sup>

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