

Unlicensed home daycares in Ontario oppose regulation ^[1]

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EXCERPTS: When Andrea Gibson's daughter Mya was born three years ago, she and her husband Joey looked at their budget and began to explore daycare options.

But Gibson's 24-hour shifts as a child and youth worker and her relatively low wages meant daycare would be hard to find and even more difficult to afford.

So Gibson quit her job, put an ad on Kijiji offering home child care, and before she knew it her bright, two-bedroom Beaches apartment was filled with the happy laughter of babies, toddlers and preschoolers.

"I didn't think I would love it as much as I do," says the energetic 29-year-old Toronto mother. "Everything is fun."

"If you don't want your kids to get dirty, my daycare is not for you," she laughs.

Gibson currently provides full- and part-time care for seven children from 7 months to 3 years old - but never more than five at a time, not including Mya, as is the rule for unregulated caregivers.

But Gibson and other independent home daycare providers who are not part of the licensed system are worried that provincial changes to Ontario's Day Nurseries Act, expected this fall, may make it hard to stay open.

"I've worked really hard to build this business and if they force me to join an agency and limit the number and ages of my kids, I won't be viable," she said.

Gibson's business card, which features a grinning toddler covered in mud, sets the tone.

More than three quarters of young mothers in Canada are in the workforce and yet across the country, including Ontario, there is licensed child care for only about 22 per cent of children under age 5.

It means most kids are in unregulated settings similar to Gibson's home daycare.

Little is known about the safety or quality of the care because government officials don't visit or even keep track of where they are located. In most provinces, the only rule unregulated home caregivers have to follow involves the number of children they can look after. And no one checks unless there is a complaint.

Ontario's Education Ministry, which oversees child care in the province, has been working for more than a year on legislative changes to the rules covering licensed daycare in response to full-day kindergarten.

But two deaths in unregulated home daycares in the Toronto area last summer, including a 2-year-old who was found dead in an illegal Vaughan home where as many as 35 children were registered for care, have turned the spotlight on the unlicensed sector.

A third death in an unregulated Markham home earlier this month has added to the urgency.

All three deaths are still under investigation by police and the coroner's office.

Child-care experts have long questioned why Ontario seems to provide a financial incentive to home daycare providers to remain unlicensed.

Unregulated caregivers can have up to five children under age 10, in addition to their own kids. But regulated caregivers must count their own children in the cap. They are further limited to just two children under age 2 or three under age 3.

As a start, child-care experts want legislative changes this fall to immediately impose the same number and age limits on unregulated home daycares.

They want the province to set a goal of bringing all child-care businesses into the licensed system within five years. And they are calling for a year-long provincial consultation, including new research, to determine how best to meet that goal.

"Surely our children are as important as our restaurants," said child-care advocate Laurel Rothman, referring to mandatory licensing and health and safety inspections required in the food service industry.

In addition to tighter limits on the number and ages of children permitted, regulated home daycares in Ontario must also be affiliated with a licensed home child-care agency. Agency staff are required to visit a minimum of every three months, although many check in with

caregivers as often as once a month.

They fill vacancies, handle parent fees and many also offer caregivers liability insurance and legal support.

Agencies are responsible for ensuring a safe physical environment, healthy meals, snacks and food handling, age-appropriate activities and plans in the event of an emergency.

Most agencies further require their caregivers to have first aid and CPR training and police checks for everyone over age 18 in the home.

Many unregulated home daycare providers have first aid and CPR training, too. Some are trained in early childhood education or specialize in other areas such as art and music therapy.

They don't want to be part of an agency that finds children for them and handles parent fees, while taking a cut of as much as \$10 a day per child.

They say it is their home and they want to remain in control.

As Gibson says to parents: "You are the ones who are regulating me. You are here twice a day. Surely that's better than someone coming in once a month to count children."

Gibson has first aid and CPR training. She has a plan for emergencies and always carries a duplicate set of cue cards with all of her children's vital information. That way she can give one copy to an ambulance attendant who may need to take a child to hospital and keep the other for herself to notify the parents.

Gibson programs her care around themes that change every two weeks. Recently, she was exploring the five senses with her children, incorporating the theme into everything from artwork and snack time to outdoor play.

Still, Gibson longs for some official recognition of the good program she offers.

She is one of two Toronto members of the Ottawa-based Child Care Providers Resource Network, which offers online support, resources and workshops for parents and unregulated caregivers.

The 1,200-member network wants municipalities to set up voluntary registries of unregulated home daycare providers who have attended an accreditation training program.

To join the registry, caregivers would have to agree to issue receipts, post safety checklists, have police checks, first aid, CPR and anaphylactic training, liability insurance and participate in annual professional development.

"This would be a cost-effective way of improving quality and giving parents some assurances," said the network's executive director Doreen Cowin.

The network, which has one full-time staff member and several part-timers, is funded through membership fees and about \$242,000 in provincial and Ottawa city grants.

But licensed home child-care agencies say registries provide a false sense of security because they don't ensure ongoing caregiver support.

"Isolation is the biggest risk to home caregivers," says Marni Flaherty, president of the Home Child Care Association of Ontario. The association represents about 70 home child-care agencies that together oversee more 3,000 regulated homes with more than 60,000 children across the province.

"Part of modernizing our sector is recognizing we need a continuum of services working together to help families," she says. "Home child care needs to be better linked to daycare centres and schools so families can move back and forth to suit their needs."

Existing agencies could add staff to oversee more home daycares and grow the licensed system with relatively little extra cost to taxpayers, because agency expenses are largely covered by parent fees, she said.

Expansion and economies of scale would help non-profit agencies keep administration costs low for regulated caregivers while offering them valuable support, she added.

Moving unregulated home daycares into the licensed system won't solve the problem of affordability or respond to the demand for more licensed daycare centres, but it would be a first step, Flaherty said.

The Education Ministry has talked about regulating more home daycares, notes Joan Arruda, head of non-profit Family Day Care Services, which oversees about 285 regulated homes serving about 800 children in the GTA.

"But there is no research on what unregulated care looks like today in Ontario. And there has never been any public discussion of how those caregivers might be regulated," she says.

"The time has come for that conversation to begin."

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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