

Daycare crisis: Scrambling for care after Eva Ravikovich's death

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EXCERPTS:

Three days before Eva Ravikovich died, Alena Savitskaya's dream came true.

The young mother had been mired in the muck of a divorce, and felt forced to keep her infant daughter in the hands of an unlicensed daycare provider she didn't trust. The care was cheap, convenient and Russian-speaking, but her concern had ballooned over the eight months that her child went there. Her daughter would come home with severe rashes and diarrhea, and started behaving aggressively, said Savitskaya.

Finding herself a single mom, Savitskaya, 27, put her name on the Vaughan daycare subsidy list so she could afford better care. "I was dreaming about that, to get out. I was waiting desperately," she said.

On Friday, July 5, her subsidy was granted and she pulled her daughter from the unlicensed daycare business at 343 Yellowood Circle in Vaughan. The following Monday, doe-eyed, precocious Eva was found dead in the daycare.

At least 35 kids were signed up for care when 2-year-old Eva passed away, far more than the provincially mandated limit of five under age 10. Officials also found the home to be filthy, with garbage bags of dirty diapers in the kitchen and potentially deadly bacteria growing on aging food. The daycare business was deemed illegal and summarily shuttered.

Nearly five months later, many of the parents whose children were cared for on Yellowood Circle are still trying to move out from under the tragic pall of Eva's death. Some fear embarrassment and shame for having left their children with a care provider now under police investigation and being sued over Eva's death by her parents.

"We've had a lot of judgment with people we are friends with, and people we are acquaintances with," said one woman, whose 2-year-old daughter went to the daycare until Eva's death. She was among two parents who requested anonymity out of fear of being pinned as neglectful for having placed their children in care where the toddler died in July.

What's more, after the daycare was shut down, dozens of families were left scrambling for new child-care arrangements. The woman with the two-year-old daughter, for instance, says she was distraught after Eva's death and took a two-month leave from work. She needed to look after her daughter and find a daycare that would quell the lingering unease of leaving her child again under someone else's eye.

"I wanted her to be in an environment where she was fully supervised all the time," she said. "I guess I don't trust the (unlicensed) home daycares anymore."

Another parent, a father in Vaughan, was fired from his job after the Yellowood daycare closed, because he started turning up late and leaving early so he could look after his daughter.

Under Ontario's Day Nurseries Act, a dual child-care system subjects licensed daycares to an array of mandatory inspections and safety qualifications that don't apply to unlicensed daycare businesses. With only enough licensed spots in the province for about 20 per cent of daycare-aged children, some Yellowood parents struggled to find child care they were more comfortable with after Eva died.

"It's really hard to find a nanny. It's really hard to find daycare," said Alisa Fulshinsky, founder of an online community called Toronto Mommies, whose members include several parents from Yellowood.

"Some struggled," she said. "There's not a lot of daycare in Vaughan, because it is growing so fast."

More than three-quarters of mothers with young children are in the workforce, so safe, affordable daycare is a necessity, child-care advocates say. They argue municipalities should treat child care as a public service, like public schools, and not leave it up to the whim of private entrepreneurs.

"Our economy can't work without child care," said Andrea Calver of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. "It is time governments recognized that."

By now, most parents from Yellowood have found new child-care arrangements, said Fulshinsky. The woman with the 2-year-old daughter found a licensed spot at the Wonderland Daycare Centre near Jane St. and Rutherford Rd., a location she feels more comfortable with, though it's more expensive.

The Yellowood daycare charged between \$500 and \$800 per month for each child, according to parents. Wonderland charges \$1,250 a month for toddlers.

The centre provides better educational activities and parents are more informed, she said. "It's more money, but it's better value for the money."

Not all Yellowood parents had trouble finding new daycare for their kids. Within days of Eva's death, Lada Korine was able to place both of her kids in a licensed daycare centre, where minders speak Russian and English, she said.

"It's much easier right now to find because the (full-day) kindergarten programs have opened in school," Korine said, adding she now pays \$1,000 per month for her younger child. Her eldest is now in kindergarten.

"It's more expensive. There are no discounts," said Korine, who was also less critical of the care at Yellowood.

"I cannot say that it's better . . . My kids were happy there, and they're happy here," she said.

As for Savitskaya, she is happy that she got her child out of Yellowood before tragedy struck. But she speaks defensively when asked why she placed her child there in the first place. Like Eva's mother, Savitskaya heard of Yellowood through a friend, and had faith in the judgment of other parents in her community.

When somebody suggests a daycare attended by their own kids, "you don't check 100 per cent. You already have that trust."

A coroner's investigation continues into how Eva died. No cause of death has been released.

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