

Wynne Liberals praised for new child care legislation^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Child care advocates are praising new provincial legislation aimed at cracking down on illegal daycares and strengthening the licensed child care system.

The Child Care Modernization Act, introduced by Education Minister Liz Sandals Tuesday, would allow the government to issue fines of up to \$100,000 and immediately close daycares where children are at risk.

Currently, ministry officials must go to court to levy fines or shutter an illegal daycare.

Under the proposed act, maximum fines would rise dramatically from the current \$2,000 to \$250,000 if the ministry chooses to prosecute repeat offenders through the courts, she added.

The proposed legislation, which has been in the works for more than a year, was initially intended to shore up child care in the wake of full-day kindergarten. But it was strengthened this fall in response to the death of three young children in unregulated Toronto-area home daycares since last July.

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The proposed legislation would also remove the financial incentive of remaining unregulated. Under the act, anyone providing care for more than five children under age 10 - including their own children - would require a license.

It means unregulated caregivers would no longer be able to exclude their own children in the maximum number of kids allowed.

Unregulated caregivers would be further restricted by being able to care for only two children under age 2, as is currently the law for regulated home daycares.

In recognition of the close monitoring and support in regulated home daycares, the legislation would increase the number of children allowed from five to six. The move could increase the number of licensed spots across the province by as much as 6,000, Sandals said.

If approved, the new legislation would also close a 1993 loophole that has allowed private schools to operate pre-schools without a daycare license.

"This is a big first step in the future of child care in Ontario," said Marni Flaherty of the Home Child Care Association of Ontario, which represents 70 licensed home child care agencies that oversee about 3,000 regulated homes.

"It's important for children and families that the advantage to running home child care is with the licensed sector," she added.

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Child care expert Martha Friendly lauded the government for beefing up enforcement of unregulated child care and for "moving in the right direction" on licensed care.

"It is absolutely clear that this is an Ontario issue, but it is also an issue for the other provinces and an issue for the whole of Canada," said Friendly of the Toronto-based Child Care Resource and Research Unit. "I look forward to being part of those larger discussions."

The new legislation also clarifies many "gray areas" in the current rules by exempting family members, nannies and occasional babysitters from requiring a license. Play areas in stores, day camps and recreation programs for school-age children would also be exempt.

Provisions in the act would also give the education ministry more authority to share child care information with other ministries and government authorities, such as Children's Aid and public health.

The New Democrats welcomed the legislation but blamed the government for dragging its feet.

"Child care advocates have been sounding the alarm bells about this issue for years, that there were too many families seeking out any alternative because there wasn't enough licensed, regulated child care," said NDP Leader Andrea Horwath.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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