

Unlicensed daycares worried that new rules creating too much red tape ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The Love 2 Learn Child Care Centre has all the hallmarks of a good daycare.

A playhouse for make-believe. Colourful, pint-sized chairs and tables where children gather to make crafts and mould Play-Doh. And a bank of big windows that look out onto the jungle gym in the backyard.

All that's missing is a licence.

"I would love to be licensed," said owner Tracy Boudrias, a mother of two.

She started her home-based business in 2011 when her family moved to Carleton Place and last spring moved into a new, custom-built home that houses the daycare on the main floor.

Today, she looks after six children, including one of her own, and has hired two part-time staff.

But Boudrias is worried all of that could change if the Ontario government's proposed Child Care Modernization Act is passed.

Tabled last fall - on the heels of the tragic deaths of several children in unlicensed home daycares, including one in Orléans in July 2010 - the new legislation would change the rules around how many children an operator can look after: Home daycares that are contracted through a licensed agency would be able to accommodate six children, instead of the current maximum of five, while independent home daycares, often referred to as unlicensed, would be capped at five children.

Both licensed and unlicensed operators would have to include their own children under the age of six in that total and neither could accept more than two children under the age of two and three children under the age of three.

(Unlicensed home daycares don't currently have to include their own children or abide by the rule around age caps, which means a provider can earn more money by working independently because they can legally accept more children).

"We've turned the mathematical equation around to try and incent more people to be licensed," Education Minister Liz Sandals said in an interview.

The changes could create approximately 6,000 new licensed spaces across Ontario if all current licensed home care providers took advantage of the new rule.

But Boudrias said unlicensed operators will be left out in the cold.

She said wishes she could get a licence directly from the government, as operators in British Columbia can do, instead of through an agency that holds the licence and monitors centres like hers, which is how it works in Ontario.

Agencies take a bite out of the profit and remove some of the control that she and others enjoy as private business owners, she said.

"Why would I do the same work that I've been doing for less money?" Boudrias asked.

"This is my home, this is my business. Why should a third party that's not owned by the government come in and tell me how to do things?"

There are convincing arguments on both sides of the debate.

Why don't home daycares want to join agencies in order to get licensed?

The main reason is that independent operators are entrepreneurs. Like Boudrias, many want to run their own businesses and establish the rules. They want to be able to choose clients, keep siblings together and have a say over what age of children they look after.

And then there's the financial piece: Independent operators will earn less money through an agency and many don't think they need the resources or support agencies provide.

Doreen Cowin of the Child Care Providers Resource Network makes the point that no home daycare in Ontario has a licence - as she sees it, all are independent. The difference is that some are regulated by their own standards and the expectations of parents and some are contracted through a licensed agency.

Parents today are savvy and know what to look for around the operator's home, she said. If they don't like what they see, they bring it up with the provider. And if they're still not satisfied, they leave.

Still, Cowin wants the province to create a central registry for all home daycare providers and, eventually, an accreditation system. Basic requirements to be on the registry could include things such as criminal record check and first aid/CPR certification.

The CCPRN has 800 paying members and another 800 on the database. They all can access a wide array of information, attend workshops and borrow resources from the network's Colonnade Road office.

Why should home daycares join a licensed agency?

Andrew Fleck Child Care Services is one of 17 licensed agencies in the Ottawa area that oversee close to 1,300 home daycares.

They are inspected quarterly and providers must follow comprehensive agency policies regarding safety, supervision and support of children's development, said Kim Hiscott, the executive director.

Unlicensed providers often say parents provide monitoring on a daily basis, but Hiscott wonders if some parents might be hesitant to check on the smoke detectors, inspect other equipment and ask for proof that the provider has up-to-date first aid and CPR.

Hiscott added the established ratios for home daycares are based on research and beliefs regarding the number of children one individual can safely and effectively provide care for.

Private home daycares that work with a licensed agency like hers remain independent contractors, but have access to professional development and support, and they don't have to be responsible for collecting fees and issuing receipts.

The daily rate for a full-time child enrolled at one of Andrew Fleck's home daycare is \$43.74; there is a \$8.33 administration fee, so the provider gets \$35.41.

But Hiscott's agency is holding a session this week to find out what it could do to entice more unlicensed providers to join an agency, including potentially lowering the administration fee.

"Our ultimate goal is to support families in accessing high quality, licensed care," she said.

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