

Regulate unlicensed daycares, but keep a light touch ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

We don't know the exact circumstances surrounding the tragic death of a four-month-old boy on Valentine's Day. We do know that he was found without vital signs at an unlicensed daycare in northwest Toronto. And we know that he is the fourth child to die at such a facility in Ontario, in the short space of seven months.

Home daycares provide a vital service, offering parents a convenient, cost-effective alternative to their licensed counterparts, which are typically more expensive and where space is in short supply. It is precisely because so many families choose this option - 80 per cent of children in daycare are at unregulated facilities - that government should take a closer look at how they operate, to see if there are any risks they pose to children's welfare.

At the moment, thousands of unregulated home daycares in Ontario essentially operate in a regulatory vacuum. They are not subject to the same standards or inspections as their licensed counterparts. Virtually the only rule unlicensed daycare operators have to follow is one that limits the number of children in care to five, not including their own.

Kathleen Wynne's Liberal government is seeking to slightly change that, introducing a bill last December that seeks to mitigate some of the potential safety risks. The Childcare Modernization Act would work to effectively identify those unlicensed daycares that aren't safe, and punish them with stiffer fines.

The bill would also tighten the rules on how many children are allowed in an unlicensed home daycare. The limit remains five, but the unlicensed provider would have to include their own kids under the age of six in that total. Provincial inspectors would also wield more power, including the ability to levy heavier fines or close a facility if violations are found.

This law could go a long way toward improving safety at unregulated child-care spaces. But in the event of a spring election, all bets are off, and the Childcare Modernization Act could die on the vine. That would be a shame, and a disservice to hundreds of thousands of Ontario families who rely on unlicensed daycare. Most home daycares are safe and well-run. They don't need heavy government oversight. But neither should they be operating in a regulatory black hole.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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