

Ottawa child care provider fighting shutdown^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A popular Ottawa child care provider is fighting the shutdown of her daycare over government concerns about the number of children she looks after and alleged hazards in her home.

Kathy Rowe, 53, said she's been looking after kids for close to 20 years. Recently, Rowe has been looking after as many as nine children under 10 years old at her Blair Street house, although the children wouldn't usually all be there at the same time, she said.

The number of children is a problem for the Ministry of Education, which oversees Ontario daycares, and one Rowe says an inspector flagged last week when she visited the home. The province stipulates that unlicensed daycares, such as Rowe's, have a maximum of five children under the age of 10. Any more than that is considered illegal.

After getting shut down last week over the number of kids and home "hazards" identified by the Children's Aid Society, Rowe says she's fighting to stay open and is calling for changes to provincial daycare laws, including more monitoring overall.

"There are a lot of people out there that should not be running daycares," Rowe said. "But that shouldn't mean that responsible people who are committed are going to be treated like criminals."

A group of current and former parents who used Rowe's services are rallying around her. They helped clean her home on Sunday and plan to picket an inspector expected to return Monday.

"I understand the system is black and white ... but I do really feel the parents should be able to make a decision," said Laura Sutin, whose son and daughter each stayed with Rowe for several years ending in 2011, when they grew out of daycare.

Before signing up with Rowe, Sutin said she saw her with about five kids at an indoor playground, all donning red shirts for easier identification.

Once her kids went there, Sutin said they "thrived," enjoying educational activities, outings and pets at Rowe's home. "She ended up being one of the best things in our life," Sutin said.

But those factors aren't considered under the Day Nurseries Act, which was the subject of proposed changes before a bill died on the Order Paper last week, when an election was called. The changes wouldn't have allowed for more children at unlicensed daycares.

Lauren Ramey, spokeswoman for Minister of Education Liz Sandals, said the ministry responds to complaints about too many kids being at an unlicensed daycare.

When an inspector arrived, Rowe said there were eight children under 10 and three older kids. She said she was aware of the limit under the law, but it's a number of kids she is comfortable with.

Ramey said if other issues are found at a daycare, other agencies can be called in. She did not respond to case-specific questions.

Children's Aid was called in Rowe's case, and according to an email Rowe provided to the Citizen, an inspector identified hazards inside her home, including the kitchen needing cleaning, choking hazards, a missing vent cover, improper storage of medication and a cat litter box being in an area where kids have access.

On Sunday, Children's Aid after-hours supervisor Anita Beaudry said she had no information specific to the case.

- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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