

Canada's live in caregiver program 'ran out of control' and will be reformed: Jason Kenny ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Canada's live-in caregiver program that supplies cheap nannies from abroad "ran out of control" and will be reformed in the "fairly near future," Employment Minister Jason Kenney said.

Mr. Kenney said the government-run program that allows families to hire abroad has "mutated" into a program of "family reunification," whereby thousands of foreigners are coming to work for their own relatives in jobs that might otherwise not exist.

"I was in Manila a few years ago to give a seminar on nannies' rights. ... I was there with 70 caregivers who were coming to Canada. None had questions about rights. All 70 of them were going to work for relatives in Canada and all they wanted to know was: what was the penalty for working outside the home illegally, and how long it would take them to sponsor family members," said Mr. Kenney during an editorial board meeting with the National Post on Tuesday.

The live-in caregiver program fills a gap in elder and child care as part of the temporary foreign workers program, but was exempt from Mr. Kenney's extensive overhaul of that controversial visa stream announced last week.

It is different from other temporary worker visas in that once caregivers complete 24 months of full-time employment, they are allowed to apply for permanent residency in Canada for themselves and their families.

Mr. Kenney said his colleague, Minister for Citizenship and Immigration Chris Alexander, will be announcing reforms in the "fairly near future" but would not elaborate on what they were, or when they would be brought forward.

The minister said the number of people - mainly from the Philippines - trying to get permanent resident status through the program "ran out of control."

Between 2008 and 2013, the program granted permanent residency to more than 60,000 live-in caregivers and their families.

More than 90% of primary applicants are women from the Philippines.

A government document from 2012 warned that as many as 40% of applicants could be using the program for family reunification.

Last March, the number of live-in caregiver applicants and their families waiting for residency stood at 45,185, with applications taking an average of five years to process. Although the government contends this year it will process 17,500 applications to ease the situation, every day there are new applicants who have from two to five people they want to bring to Canada.

The Department of Citizenship and Immigration has refused to release the most up-to-date backlog figures, despite repeated requests.

Manuela Gruber Hersch, director of the Association of Nanny and Caregiver Agencies, says demand for caregivers on the ground is huge, but that the government has been quietly trying to stem numbers for the past few years, by making it harder for families to hire a caregiver.

Applications have dropped from a high of 20,000 in 2007, to an average now of about 9,000 a year.

"Families are no longer willing to go through all the red tape and pay fees for something that takes so long and might not work out," she said.

The knock-on effect is fake employers who charge applicants to bring them into the country, or a family member "sponsoring" relatives.

Former caregiver Terry Olayta, who runs the First Ontario Alliance of Caregivers Canada, rejected the assertion that the program is being used as a form of family reunification, calling the assertion "racist."

"If it so happens that I am an approved employer and I would like someone I already know to come here to work for me, then why should I not be able to do that?"

Ms. Olayta said every aspect of the program is "traumatic" for caregivers.

"The dream is to have a better life, but there is so much to consider - you are leaving your own family, job, community, forgetting who you are. If you were not in difficulty, why would you put yourself into this kind of work?"

Ms. Olayta said women often feel trapped in the program and that there are many "negative stories."

"The emotional and social cost is so high," she said.

Audrey Macklin, immigration expert and University of Toronto law professor, said the program in its current form essentially compensates live-in caregivers with a chance to stay in the country after "exploiting" them for two years with low wages and undesirable working conditions.

- reprinted from the National Post

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