

Red tape puts Toronto daycare workers' wage boost at risk^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Toronto daycare supervisor Vera McDonald and 12 of her staff are worried they won't see a penny of up to \$1,200 they say they are each owed under a \$1-an-hour provincial wage grant to boost chronically low pay in the sector..

That is because Grenoble Day-Care Centre in Flemingdon Park, where McDonald and many of her staff worked for more than a decade, closed in September.

"My daycare was a very good centre, and my teachers worked beyond the call of duty," McDonald said of the staff at the 57-spot centre, which served children from birth to age 4. "They earned this money and deserve to be paid."

The grant, along with another \$1-an-hour pay hike next year, was announced in January by Premier Kathleen Wynne and applies to workers in licensed daycares who earn less than \$26.27 an hour. To get the money, daycare operators must apply to their respective municipalities and, in turn, pass it along to their employees.

Hourly wages for staff at Grenoble Day-Care ranged from about \$13.50 to \$22.75 before the for-profit centre closed, said McDonald, who earned the most.

Grenoble Day-Care owner Deborah Li applied for the wage grant last spring and was approved for funding in September, said Elaine Baxter-Trahair, general manager of Toronto children's services.

But before the city can release the funds, centres must provide a detailed plan of how the money will be distributed to staff based on hours worked in 2015, she said. Days off for sickness, vacation and training are not eligible for the top-up, she noted.

Since Grenoble Day-Care closed before submitting the information, the city has been unable to determine how much each worker is owed, Baxter-Trahair said in an interview earlier this week.

However, operators are not obliged to apply for the money under the provincial top-up scheme, she said. About 100 centres in Toronto — all private businesses — did not apply for the wage grants on behalf of their staff, meaning those workers will not get the pay hike, she added.

The Star was unable to reach Li after leaving several email and phone messages this week.

But "out of the blue" Wednesday, Li contacted city officials to sort out the payments, said Baxter-Trahair.

"We will be mailing (Li) a template, and all she has to do is fill in the information," she said. "If she can do that properly... and it looks reasonable, then we can process the payments directly to the individuals."

"I'm going to talk to the province and let them know what we are doing to make sure they are comfortable with that," Baxter-Trahair said.

A spokeswoman for Education Minister Liz Sandals said the province is not aware of any other municipality planning to pay daycare staff directly as a result of an operator closing.

However, "there is nothing in provincial legislation that prevents (municipalities) from transferring the funds to the employees," Alessandra Fusco said in an email.

"If the operator cannot be reached to provide funds to eligible staff, (municipalities have) the discretion to determine the payment mechanism for staff as long as the accountability measures outlined by the ministry are met," Fusco said. "It is our expectation that (municipalities) will ensure that employees are receiving the funds that they are eligible for."

Child-care advocates also hope the Grenoble Child-Care staff get paid.

"Not only are these staff entitled to this money, they have just lost their jobs and can really use the help," said Jane Mercer of the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care. "Surely the city and the province sit down together to work something out."

-reprinted from Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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