

# Workers who lost jobs when daycare closed fight for wage grants <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** Toronto Star

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 13 Jan 2016

## EXCERPTS

When Markham's TLC Daycare closed in September, 19 child-care workers lost their livelihood.

But the non-profit centre's board of directors is determined to ensure 17 former staff who were eligible to receive a \$1-an-hour provincial wage grant last year get their money. They are owed an average of about \$1,200 each.

"It just seems terribly unfair that York Region is refusing to pay staff the wages they are entitled to, especially when staff at a daycare in Toronto that also closed last September are getting paid," said parent Kristina Drosos, the centre's former board chair whose two children attended TLC.

Twelve child-care workers at the former Grenoble Day-Care Centre in Thorncliffe Park are receiving their grant money this week after a Star story last fall prompted Toronto children's services staff to act.

But Cathy Elliott, manager of child-care services for York Region, said provincial officials have told her that if daycares close before grant agreements are signed, the workers can't be paid.

"York Region consulted with the province on this matter, and this is the direction that we received," she said to Drosos in an email this week.

Regional municipalities are administering the wage grants on behalf of the province, which launched the initiative last year to raise chronically low wages in the sector. Under the \$269-million scheme, child-care workers with hourly wages below \$26.27 were eligible to receive a \$1-an-hour wage hike last year and another \$1-an-hour boost this year. Average hourly wages for the province's 42,000 daycare workers in licensed settings were running at about \$16 when the policy was announced in 2014.

A spokeswoman for Education Minister Liz Sandals confirmed Tuesday that daycare staff aren't eligible for the grant if their centres close before signing wage-enhancement agreements with municipalities.

But in the case of TLC — which had received preliminary funding approval from York and had completed a detailed funding distribution plan more than two months before it closed — the ministry is willing to be flexible, said Alessandra Fusco.

"If the (region) and the child-care operator are able to come to an agreement that meets the ministry's wage-enhancement guidelines for eligibility and accountability, there may be avenues... that would allow payment to the eligible child-care workers retroactively," Fusco said in an email.

A York Region spokeswoman said child-care officials there "are happy to work with the ministry of education to explore and review options."

TLC staff were devastated last fall when the City of Markham voted to take back the daycare space in the municipality's civic centre, forcing the high-quality program to close after 25 years. They were dealt a double blow when they learned they wouldn't be getting their wage grant, either, said daycare worker Regan Breadmore. She started at TLC in 1993 and is owed about \$1,400.

"Twenty-two years of my life were gone in a heartbeat when we closed," said the 43-year-old mother of two. "That extra money would certainly come in handy right about now."

Breadmore, who was earning \$24 an hour at TLC, says the only daycare jobs she can find are entry-level positions paying about \$12 an hour. And since demand for child-care workers is high, she can't qualify for provincial help to retrain for work in another field, where the pay is better.

"I'm really in a bind," she says. "It's just so very sad we had to close."

Carolyn Ferns, of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, called the situation "shameful."

"It's like rubbing salt in the wound," she said. "It's terrible that those funds aren't in the hands of the hardworking and dedicated staff who served those families right up to the end."

Toronto's general manager of children's services said the province is tweaking guidelines for the wage grant for 2016, in light of problems

with the roll-out last year.

“We have been working with the ministry and are expecting a better process for 2016,” said Elaine Baxter-Trahair.

-reprinted from Toronto Star

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** wages <sup>[3]</sup>

childcare workforce <sup>[4]</sup>

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