

No danger of Fernwood daycare closing

Rooftop vigil aims to raise awareness of child-care issues

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From the roof of the Fernwood Community Centre's infant and toddler daycare building, Roberta Martell has a bird's-eye view of the property, in particular the children frolicking in the playground below.

Many people were looking up to her, literally and figuratively, on Tuesday when the jovial executive director of the Fernwood Neighbourhood Resource Group began a planned four-day camp-out and hunger strike to bring attention to the lack of daycare spaces, the lack

of qualified workers to staff them and the plight of working parents in Victoria and across the province.

"This isn't about me and exemptions, it's about 11,000 families in B.C. who are currently on wait lists and more who are in danger of losing their spots (at existing daycares)," Martell said.

The Fernwood group has struggled to find enough staff holding either an Early Childhood Education (ECE) or Infant Toddler Education (INT) certificate to satisfy provincial daycare licensing regulations for its 20-child facility.

Recently they applied for five staff exemptions they hoped would bring them into compliance with the

mandated ratios of certified staff to children. They were granted one by the Vancouver Island Health Authority, the monitoring body for the regulations.

During a rally held Tuesday outside the daycare centre, signs called for VIHA to let the centre remain open while it looks for a solution to the problem.

While VIHA informed the Fernwood NRG this week that its daycare was not in compliance with the regulations, manager of licensing Kim Macdonald insists that at no time has the health authority threatened the daycare with closure or even fines for non-compliance.

The process of working through such a scenario is

never as black and white as that, she said, noting that VIHA works closely with operators to ensure that the health and safety of children in care remains paramount during any non-compliance period.

"We have to look at the whole picture, not just the staffing. We have to look at what is the impact of that issue on the operation of the facility," Macdonald said.

What is more likely to happen than closure or fines is closer and more frequent inspections of the facility, she added.

Martell said the centre would gladly hire workers with appropriate education if they were available. Fernwood pays slightly above the median rate for daycare workers and gives staff two weeks paid holiday at Christmastime in addition to regular time off, she said.

Martell is not comfortable with the idea of offering further financial incentives to attract workers from other regions, calling it "poaching from areas that need workers just as much as we do."

The regularity of daycare staff moving on is epidemic, said Tanya Wheldon, who took over as supervisor for the Fernwood infant and toddler centre in September, after her predecessor went on holiday and chose not to return.

In the nearly three years Wheldon's worked in Fernwood, 17 staffers have come and gone.

"Lots of people don't want to work with this age group (six months to 3 years)," she said, adding that often they move up to the 3-5 years age group.

Only about three dozen students are currently enrolled in Camosun Col-

lege's early childhood educator program.

Of the 83 child-care facilities on the South Island, more than half cater to preschoolers and toddlers.

It's a situation that leaves many daycares in dire straits.

"We advertised for three months (for one ECE position) and didn't get any applicants," Wheldon said.

Daycare workers generally make between \$14 to \$18 per hour.

Last month the provincial government announced it would be investing \$12.5 million to create 2,000 new licensed child care spaces by 2010.

Currently there are 35 institutions in B.C. that offer either the one-year ECE program or the two-year INT program or both.

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