



**Samira Lall, director of the nanny agency Amacare Inc., says if the government keeps rejecting applications for nannies the business will have to fold.**

**Photograph by: Tyler Anderson, National Post , Financial Post**

Michelle Ketchabaw, a 36-year-old high school teacher, lives in the remote Northern Ontario town of Sioux Lookout, population 5,500. It has one library, one Tim Hortons and two public daycares for non-First Nations children, with six spots between them for kids under two.

That doesn't leave parents like Ketchabaw, who want to keep working after they have children, with a lot of options. She put her now-15-month-old baby on a waiting list for one of those six spots before she was even conceived and still didn't get one. Private daycares are all booked up. Job ads for local nannies attracted exactly one candidate, a 16-year-old high school student and mother whose home Ketchabaw determined wouldn't be safe for her daughter.

So Ketchabaw applied to hire a foreign nanny on a temporary work permit, through the decades-old arrangement formerly known as the Live-In Caregiver Program. After the nanny Ketchabaw wanted to hire failed an English test, however, she had to reapply under new rules that went into effect in December, removing the requirement that the caregiver live in the family's home.

Approved applications "will only include a live-in arrangement if the employer and caregiver have agreed to that arrangement," announced Citizenship and Immigration Canada in October. But since applications to hire foreign caregivers under the new rules started pouring in, the government has been denying almost all of them. Statistics obtained by the Association of Caregiver and Nanny Agencies Canada under an access to information request show the federal government has been approving as few as three and as many as 63 foreign caregiver applications each month since December, compared to 700 to 1,000 per month under the old rules. And documents seen by the Financial Post demonstrate the rules are being inconsistently applied. The government has approved some applications that say room and board is available on a cost-free and optional basis and denied others that say the same thing, on the grounds that the family did not appear to be sincere about the room and board being truly optional.

As a result, caregiver agencies across the country are going out of business, the cost of hiring a nanny has increased dramatically and there are growing reports of a nanny black market, in which caregivers unable to enter Canada on a legitimate work permit arrive under visitors' visas and get paid under the table. A cap on the number of foreign caregivers that can get permanent residency has made Canada a lot less appealing to prospective nannies, who often work here as a way to get a foothold in the country before bringing their kids and husbands over. Many dual-income families, especially those who live outside urban centres, are deciding their only option is to have one spouse stay at home.

"One of the things they have done (in Ottawa) is make it nearly impossible to bring in a live-in caregiver," said University of Western Ontario economist Mike Moffatt, who has made a specialty of studying temporary foreign worker data. Ketchabaw is now preparing the lengthy application for a third time, after learning that even mentioning that she has a room available for a nanny could send her request to the paper shredder.

But since it's highly unlikely she'll get permission to hire someone before the school year starts, her husband has applied for a year of unpaid leave from work, which may or may not be approved.

"They're putting up road block after road block after road block," Ketchabaw said of the government.

Spokespeople for Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) Minister Pierre Poilievre, whose department is responsible for approving applications to hire caregivers, and Citizenship and Immigration Minister Chris Alexander did not make the ministers available for an interview.

An ESDC spokeswoman provided reasons for the sudden drop in approvals including fewer applications since the new rules went into effect and incomplete or incorrect applications "as employers adjusted to the new requirements."

"We are starting to see the number of applications and processing levels smooth out as employers better understand the requirements under the new Caregiver Program," the statement said. December's changes were part of a series of reforms to the temporary foreign worker program that came after months of accusations and embarrassing news reports over non-Canadians supposedly taking jobs away from hapless citizens. Royal Bank of Canada came under fire for reportedly asking its employees to train temporary foreign workers who were set to replace them.

The few families that have received approval to hire a live-in caregiver under the new rules are no longer allowed to deduct room and board from their pay, increasing the monthly cost for families by about \$600. The amount foreign caregivers make per month varies depending on what kind of care they're providing and where they're working, but one nanny agency said the cost of an unskilled live-in childcare provider in the Toronto area has gone from about \$1,600 monthly to \$2,200.

The cost to apply under the new rules has also increased from \$275 to \$1,000, but it can be as high as \$4,000 if a family enlists the help of a professional caregiver agency. That's on top of the cost of relocating the nanny here, and providing health insurance.

While the cost of live-in nannies has increased considerably, the cost of live-out nannies has skyrocketed, especially for families looking for someone willing to work outside the hours of 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. One Toronto-area woman who leaves for work just after 6 a.m. (she asked not to be identified because her workplace is not aware of her precarious childcare situation) said after her live-in caregiver application was denied, the only nanny who expressed interest in the job demanded a gross salary of \$50,000 per year for such an early start time.

A spokesman for Alexander, the immigration minister, said 88 per cent of applications

for live-out caregivers continue to be approved, the same rate as before the December changes. But Manuela Gruber Hersch, director of the West Coast-based Association of Caregiver and Nanny Agencies Canada, said live-out applications previously only made up a small portion of the total.

Gruber Hersch said situations where families genuinely need a live-in caregiver include those where both parents are shift workers, professionals working long hours and people living in small towns with few public transportation options. She said highly skilled professional women who thought they would be able to hire a nanny are leaving the workforce instead.

The stress is taking a toll on Samira Lall, director of the Toronto nanny agency Amacare Inc.

If the government keeps rejecting applications at the current rate, Amacare might not be around to send any more Christmas cards, Lall said. Frustrated families are filing fewer applications and the paperwork necessary to process each one keeps increasing as the agency tries to keep up with the rejections.

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