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CHILD CARE

Quality Ratings May Be Coming State Considers Health, Safety Standards

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Each day, thousands of babies and young children in Connecticut are cared for in programs and home-based centers whose health and safety are unmonitored.

Under a proposal being considered by a key state panel, every child care provider would have to meet minimal health and safety standards.

This recommendation by the Early Childhood Education Cabinet — appointed by lawmakers to find ways to overhaul the jumble of early child care programs throughout the state — could profoundly change the thriving unregulated child care market.

An initial step would be to require that every provider be licensed. But this is just the first benchmark to rate the quality of programs that care for as many as 100,000 Connecticut children.

"We need some health and safety assurances. This seems like a decent place to put an anchor down," Deb Flis told the Early Childhood Education Cabinet this month. Flis is with Charts-a-Course, an office within the state Department of Education that promotes child care standards. "We need to know what is going on out there," she said.

Health Complaints

Of the 7,245 child care providers that the state knows of, nearly half are unlicensed, according to the state's Quality Performance Report for child care programs to the federal government. The state is aware of these unlicensed programs because they receive state subsidies for at least 10,000 low-income children. But officials think there are thousands more children in unregistered, unsubsidized programs.

The Department of Public Health reports that it receives about 100 complaints a month about the condition or practices of licensed and unlicensed child care facilities. Last year, 54 licensed facilities received citations. In the 2011-12 fiscal year, the Department of Social Services reported that the agency stopped subsidies for 444 day care providers because of health or safety reasons.

Debra Johnson, who oversees child care programs that do need to be licensed at the Department of Public Health, said that when complaints are made about unlicensed facilities, the agency has no choice but to ignore them.

"We don't have any authority over those unlicensed facilities," she said.

State law exempts certain types of child care facilities from needing a license: This includes care provided by a neighbor or at a drop-in child care center at a grocery store, for example. The

proposal that the cabinet is considering would eliminate these exemptions.

The most recent review of health and safety conditions in programs that are licensed in the state also reveals that the current system might not even be effective.

"Inspections revealed an alarming number of significant health and safety concerns," the Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut, which provides independent research for the health care industry, reported in 2009 on its finding of unannounced spot visits.

Myra Jones-Taylor, appointed by the governor to work with the cabinet, said that licensing child care is on her radar.

"Do we want to have children in unregulated care? We need to think strongly about that," she said.

More Than Just Safety

When parents search for a preschool or day care center, they have to take the provider's word that it is a quality program.

That's about to change.

Last year, lawmakers appropriated millions of dollars to create a rating system so that parents would know how good a specific program actually is. The rating system being considered would give providers incentives to improve their programs.

Child advocates have expressed concerns for years about the lack of coordination among the hodgepodge of state child care programs.

Connecticut Voices for Children reported earlier this year that "there is no method to the madness," when it pointed out that the state insufficiently monitors early child care programs and therefore doesn't know what it's getting for its annual investment of \$224.6 million.

The recommendation from the early childhood group would create a four-tier system, and reimbursements from the state would be linked to a rating.

Before even getting to the first tier, employee background checks would have to be done, and staff members would need first aid training.

To move up the rating ladder, performance benchmarks, not measured by student performance, would need to be achieved. Increased professional development and the education attainment of staff will also earn programs higher marks. Programs will also have to be working toward certification with the National Association for the Education of Young Children to land the highest rating. There are currently 468 centers and providers that are NAEYC-certified, according to DSS' child care quality perform-

ance report to the federal government.

"I understand the intent to raise standards. I don't want people to do [child care] underground," Rep. Catherine F. Abercrombie, D-Meriden, said after a presentation of the recommendations. "We have to do this in a way to have centers want to participate."

The Price Of Quality

Tucked into the recommendations are also major financial incentives for programs to improve. Every program would eventually receive a rating, however, even if it didn't intend to take steps to move up the rating system.

Some of the incentives include tuition reimbursement to increase the education of the program's staff, tax breaks, waiving some of the state fees for licensing and background checks, and picking up some of the cost for certification and other improvements.

No price tag has been assigned to the proposal yet.

"Before you cost it out and scare people away, let's set the tone of the expectations," said Eileen Ward, director of the Children's Community Development Center in Westport, who helped craft the proposal.

Jones-Taylor, the governor's point person for early child care, said the proposal falls much in line with her vision for what's needed.

"This is the framework for what we will present to the governor, I have no doubt," she said. "My job is to now take the economic reality we have before us and make some recommendations."

With the state facing a \$1.1 billion deficit for the 2013-14 fiscal year, she said much of what moves forward will be determined on what the state can afford.

The cabinet is expected to sign off on its recommendations at its Dec. 20 meeting.

► This story originally appeared at CTMirror.org, the website of The Connecticut Mirror, an independent, nonprofit news organization covering government, politics and public policy in the state.