

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

April 30, 2009 in Idaho

Senate sends day care license bill to Idaho governor

Betsy Z. Russell / The Spokesman-Review

Tags: [idaho legislature](#)



Sen. Tim Corder, R-Mountain Home, urges the Senate to support the amended version of the day care licensing bill, SB 1112a, because “it’s still better than what we have right now.” The Senate sent the House-amended bill to the governor; it’s Idaho’s first move to regulate small day care centers, including requiring criminal background checks for operators.

BOISE - After five straight years of pushing against intense opposition, Coeur d’Alene Rep. George Saylor won a small victory Thursday when the Senate sent day-care licensing legislation to Gov. Butch Otter.

It’s a small victory - not a large one - because the bill was heavily amended in the House, after the original bill won overwhelming support in the Senate earlier this year. The amendments significantly watered down its requirements. However, Saylor endorsed the amended bill.

“This is good legislation - it meets the needs of parents for safe child care,” Saylor told the House on Wednesday night, when the bill came up for a vote after months of waiting. “We can’t make it a perfect world for our children, but we can make it a safer world.”

On Thursday, disappointed senators voted unanimously to accept the amended bill.

“These amendments change the focus from the children to the provider, from making it safe for children to making it easy for providers,” Senate sponsor Tim Corder, R-Mountain Home, told the Senate. However, he said, “We still need to do it. It’s better than what we have right now.”

Instead of requiring licensing for day-cares that care for four or more unrelated children, the amended bill now sets that threshold at seven or more unrelated kids. It also removes continuing education requirements for small day-care providers, alters fees and makes an array of other changes, some of which Corder said may raise technical or legal problems.

“I’m still asking you to support it, with the fiscal impact, with all the errors, with all the things that are wrong with these amendments - it’s still better than what we have right now,” Corder told the Senate, “and we can fix it next year.”

The amended bill does keep in a requirement for criminal background checks for operators of day care centers that care for four or more unrelated children. For those with seven or more children, there would be health and fire safety standards and inspections, and minimum adult-child staffing ratios.

Idaho currently licenses only day cares that care for 13 or more children; smaller day-cares are entirely unregulated, unless they’re in one of fewer than a dozen cities in the state that have local regulations. Even criminal background checks aren’t now required.

Coeur d’Alene is among the cities with a local day-care licensing ordinance, but officials there have long complained that operators who run afoul of those can just move outside the city limits and operate with impunity.

Lawmakers have been leery, however, about day care licensing, even though Saylor’s had backing for the past five years from day-care operators, early childhood advocacy groups, the business community, educators and more. Two years ago, a House committee killed an earlier version of the bill after several members said mothers should stay home with their own kids; more than 70,000 Idaho children are in day care. Last year, the measure was introduced but never got a hearing.

This year, however, after the bill passed the Senate on a 30-5 vote, conservatives on the House Health and Welfare Committee worked with Saylor and others to craft 20 amendments to the bill, and then agreed to support it. The House passed the bill on a 61-5 vote.

Rep. Pete Nielsen, R-Mountain Home, who opposed the bill for years, backed it this year. He touted the addition of an informational pamphlet for parents, saying he thought “mother’s intuition” was the best protection against poor day-care settings. “This is a whim-whammer of a good bill compared to how it come to us,” Nielsen told the House.

Saylor told the House a series of horrifying stories about young children abused, injured and even killed in poor-quality day cares, including several incidents in North Idaho. Inspections and standards for licensed child care centers will help avoid such cases, he said. “Their intent is not to put people out of business, their intent is to improve the care of children.”

House Health and Welfare Chairwoman Sharon Block, R-Twin Falls, said, “This legislation was completed with a good collaborative process. It provides health and safety measures for children in both urban and rural day care settings, and it’s cost effective for both large and small day care providers.”

In the final votes in the House and Senate, no North Idaho lawmakers voted against the bill.

Get more news and information at Spokesman.com