

Day care bill stalls in House committee

Bill may not see a vote before adjournment

By Jared S. Hopkins

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BOISE - After nearly four hours of hearing emotional testimony, The House Health and Welfare Committee agreed Thursday to delay a vote on a measure to tighten regulations at small day care facilities, although its survival remains in doubt as the session closes in on adjournment.

The 16-member committee voted to wait several days as Republican lawmakers - who for four straight years have killed similar bipartisan efforts - said they wanted to think about the bill and offer some amendments to parts they were concerned about.

The bill requires day care regulations to apply to facilities with at least four children and, among other things, would require facilities to perform background checks on employees, set inspection guidelines and minimum standards for first-aid certification.

More than a dozen people testified in support of the bill, while only two speakers were opposed.

Brandi Whaley, of Twin Falls, testified about a 2007 incident in which her 5-year-old daughter, Lauren, suffered injuries from a day care provider including a bloody hemorrhage in her eyes, a fractured arm and broken ribs.

She said licensing should be mandatory because while she interviewed many providers, the one she chose wasn't honest about her training or her criminal background, which included embezzlement.

"I believed and trusted her," said Whaley, who distributed pictures of her daughter's injuries to the committee. "She's still able to watch children if she wants to."

The bill's House sponsor, Rep. George Saylor, D-Coeur d'Alene, will be out of town next week. But Democrats said they remain hopeful the bill will survive for a hearing but were disappointed about Thursday's result.

The bill requires the Department of Health and Welfare, not individual health districts, to serve as a one-stop-shop for organization; have inspections bid out privately, which would pass costs onto day care providers and eliminate extra bureaucracy; and have license costs based on a sliding scale.

Sen. Tim Corder, R-Mountain Home, co-sponsor of the bill, said the bill doesn't guarantee there won't be problems, but that substandard day care facilities will be forced to close.

"It does not take the place of a family," he said of day care. "It's not intended to and we don't want it to. It's a business - a business of taking care of other children."

Day care regulation bills became a more frequent issue in the Legislature after the winter of 2005, when a Twin Falls day care provider was investigated by the state twice in a one-month span. The Kid Works day care had two separate incidents where children were left unattended. One infant child was left behind in the business after closing hours, and a toddler wandered from the property for an unspecified amount of time.

"If you vote against this bill you are voting not to endanger children but to keep them in the danger they're in now," said Will Rainford, spokesman for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Boise.

Bryan Fischer, executive director of the Idaho Values Alliance, a conservative Christian activist, said the bill would be unfair to families by driving up costs and limiting choices in rural communities.

"I believe we can let parents drive the standards for day cares," Fischer said. "Parents are in the best position to make ... inspections."

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