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Our View: Idaho must play greater role in day care regulation

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If moral victories mattered, Idaho Rep. George Saylor and Sen. Tim Corder would be hosting a statewide celebration this week.

Last Thursday, the Idaho Senate easily passed their bill to require state regulation of small day care facilities. That was a notable success, given that in the five years Coeur d'Alene Democrat Saylor has been pushing the measure, this is the first time it has gotten out of committee, let alone through either house.

But despite the encouragement supplied by a 30-5 vote, the bill can expect a formidable reception in the House. If that body doesn't rise to the Senate's responsibility, Saylor and Corder, a Mountain Home Republican, will go home empty-handed.

Meanwhile, thousands of Idaho children will remain as much at risk as they were in 2006 when a survey of 1,300 Idaho parents found child care standards in Idaho to be inadequate and worse.

Or in 2007, when the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies ranked Idaho dead last among the states for its oversight of child care.

Although some Idaho cities, including Coeur d'Alene, have taken the initiative to enact their own ordinances, the state in general imposes no regulatory oversight on businesses that care for fewer than 12 children who aren't related to the provider. Caregivers don't have to undergo criminal background checks, and their facilities don't have to pass safety and health inspections.

It is the parents' responsibility, not the state's, to check those things out, opponents have argued. So, while the Idaho Legislature has been agreeable to regulating groomers of dogs and horses, it has refused to take that responsibility when it comes to children.

As a consequence, Sayler and Corder can point to a growing list of incidents in which Idaho children have been entrusted to settings where drugs and alcohol were used, sex offenders were present, or adult caregivers were not always present.

No law and no inspection can eliminate all possibility of a tragedy. But state government has better resources at its disposal than parents have to screen the people and premises necessary for safe, reliable child care. How would parents go about conducting a criminal background check?

Yes, parents own the responsibility for picking suitable care facilities for their children, but as taxpayers and voters, they should expect their state government to be a responsible partner in the task of keeping children safe.

The Idaho Senate has demonstrated its understanding of that partnership. Now it is the House's turn to show that it cares more for children than for ideology. If it does so, Sayler, Corder and other children's advocates can celebrate for real.

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