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## Day care licensing bill clears Idaho Senate committee

Betsy Z. Russell / The Spokesman-Review

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**Rep. George Saylor, D-Coeur d'Alene, explains the day care licensing bill to the Senate Health & Welfare Committee on Wednesday afternoon. Saylor has proposed such a bill every year for five years in a row. Last year's version didn't get a hearing; this year's committee hearing on SB 1112 drew a full house.**

BOISE - Minimum licensing standards for small day care centers in Idaho survived a Senate committee hearing Wednesday and headed for debate in the full Senate.

The sponsors are offering several minor amendments; one restores a word inadvertently left out from the National Rifle Association's suggested wording about gun storage at home day cares. When the bill is opened up for amendments in the full Senate, any senator may offer changes.

The vote was 8-1, with backers saying it's time to enact the long-debated bill, but others saying parents, not the state, should worry about day care. The committee's two North Idaho members, Sens. Joyce Broadsword, R-Sagle, and Jim Hammond, R-Post Falls, voted in favor.

Senate Health and Welfare Committee Chairwoman Patti Anne Lodge, R-Huston, said, "We've got to stop taking responsibility away from the parents to decide if that place is clean - they go there every day."

Rep. George Saylor, D-Coeur d'Alene, co-sponsor of the bill, told the committee, "Parents would still make the choice ... that's their right and responsibility."

But he said the state should provide some basic resources to families, including "the assurance that there are some consistent safety standards in place."

The bill requires licensing and sets minimum safety standards for day cares that care for four or more children unrelated to the operator, including criminal background checks, health and fire safety inspections, and minimum adult-child ratios.

Sen. Denton Darrington, R-Declo, marveled at Wednesday's calm and orderly hearing. "I warned Sen. Lodge that this is going to go on for days and they'll be hanging from the rafters," he said, recalling day-care licensing hearings in 1986. "But this is 20 years later, and things have changed."

Darrington said, though he has concerns about the bill, he expects it to pass this year. "We're just at that point in society when more people expect the government to do more for them, and that's just the way it is," he said.

The bill also streamlines the licensing system, allows the state Department of Health and Welfare to contract for day-care inspections rather than requiring public health districts to perform them, and includes sliding-scale fees based on the number of children.

Sen. Tim Corder, R-Mountain Home, the bill's Senate sponsor, read off a list of things Idaho now doesn't require for day cares that have 12 or fewer children: Criminal background checks, first aid and CPR training, a functioning telephone on the premises, smoke alarms, fencing around water hazards, and basic ratios of the number of adults to children. The ratios, Corder said, are based on "a simple premise - if there is an emergency, how many children can that adult get out of the building?" Idaho went with four, but Corder said the national standard is three.

Lawmakers have been leery, however, about day care licensing. 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; an

estimated 70,000 Idaho children are in day care. Last year, the measure was introduced but never got a hearing.

Annie Henna, speaking for Catholic Charities of Idaho, said her organization considers it "desirable" for parents to stay home with their kids, but said, "It's not always realistic. ... Idaho ranks the second-highest in the nation in the number of children living in single-parent households."

Darrington sharply questioned her. "All those people who emailed me and said, 'Get the government out of our lives, out of our day cares, we'll make our own decisions.' ... What does this legislation do for them?" he asked.

Henna, a college student intern for Catholic Charities, responded, "There is a time when government needs to step in and set standards."

Kimberly Hoffman, a former home day-care operator from Nampa, said she made less than minimum wage caring for four children, though she has a bachelor's degree. If requirements increase, she said, "That is going to make it so unbelievably difficult to operate and still have an income, that it won't even be worthwhile."

However, child care operators and their associations around the state are supporting the bill and helped develop it.

Karen Mason, executive director of the Idaho Association for the Education of Young Children, said, "We're talking about minimum, bare minimum health and safety standards." Some operators aren't thrilled about having to comply with the new ratios, she said, but support the idea of basic standards that are the same for everyone.

"We license hairdressers, we license dog groomers, we license every other kind of business," Mason told the committee, "and it seems reasonable to me that when children can't walk out of a child care facility if it's dirty or not clean or not safe, that we would at least look at the minimum health and safety standards."

The Rev. Bryan Fischer testified against the bill, saying costs for things like criminal background checks and inspections "inevitably are going to be passed on to working families." He said, "A certain number of day care centers will simply go out of operation."

Mike Kane, lobbyist for Idaho's public health districts, told the committee, "The health districts recognize that this is a good thing for the state of Idaho."

Sayler has brought the bill back for five straight years, with backing from day-care operators, early childhood advocacy groups, the business community, educators and more. More than a half-dozen Idaho cities, including Coeur d'Alene, already have their own child-care licensing laws, but operators who run afoul of those can just move outside the city limits and operate with impunity. The state licenses only day-care centers that care for 13 or more children.

In addition to Lodge, the other senator voting against the bill was Sen. Melinda Smyser, R-Parma.

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