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Advocates: Day care oversight still issue in Texas

BY Associated Press
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Working two jobs to make ends meet, Keisha Brown was looking for affordable, safe child care for her 16-month-old son.

After visiting a home day care run by Jessica Tata, the 21-year-old mother thought she had found what she wanted. Tata "seemed like a nice person and knew what she was doing," according to Brown.

But about a month later, her son, Elias Castillo, was dead - killed with three other children in a fire last year that started when investigators say Tata left the children alone at her day care while she went shopping. Tata is now on trial on one of four felony murder counts she faces, related to Elias' death.

Other parents who entrusted their children with Tata have told similar stories during the day care owner's trial in Houston, with some even vetting the day care through the state agency that licenses such facilities. After the fire, state lawmakers made some changes to improve oversight of home day care centers. But child care experts say Texas is among many states still lagging behind what advocates believe should be the standard for keeping tabs on such facilities.

According to a report released earlier this year by the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies, Texas and many other states fall short in terms of training requirements, background checks and inspection standards.

Tori Mannes, president and CEO of ChildCareGroup, a Dallas-based organization that helps families find affordable child care, said the parents who had children at Tata's day care were doing the right things before enrolling their kids: asking questions, visiting the facility. Tata's day care was in good standing with the state at the time of the fire.

"Most parents are trying their very best to do all they can for their children," she said. "The message is for parents to be their child's strongest advocate."

Investigators have said the fire was sparked by oil in a frying pan on a stovetop burner that had been left on. Three other children were seriously injured. Tata's attorneys argue she never intended to hurt the children, who ranged in age from 16 months to 3 years old, and that she tried to save them. Tata, 24, faces up to life in prison if convicted.

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Associated Images:



Emergency personnel respond to a 2011 day care fire that killed four children in Houston. MICHAEL PAULSEN/Houston Chronicle/AP File

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