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A baby step in improving child care

By LISA FALKENBERG
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It took 15 years and a deadly fire. But finally, lawmakers have passed a bill taking steps to improve safety for the estimated 1 million Texas youngsters in child care.

It's one of the few bright spots in a legislative session filled with dire news of budget cuts affecting children and families.

The bill, passed in both the state House and Senate, triples the number of pre-service training required for child care workers, from eight hours to 24 hours. It still takes far more hours of training (600) to give a manicure in this state, but there's no doubt the bill, sponsored by Sens. Royce West, D-Dallas, and Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, is progress.

The bill also increases annual training from 15 hours to 24 hours for workers and from 20 hours to 30 hours for directors.

And although the bill didn't initially include "registered family homes" among those subject to the new requirements, an amendment added just before passage made sure the changes would apply to home-based operations, too.

It was a "registered family home" that 22-year-old Jessica Tata was operating in west Houston when a fire broke out in February, killing four children. Tata has since been charged with felony murder, manslaughter and abandoning a child. Authorities say a pot of oil caught fire on the stove after Tata had left the children alone to go shopping.

Providing motivation

Melanie Rubin, a child care advocate who has lobbied since 1994, said the fire helped "motivate" lawmakers to support the bill, especially the amendment to include family homes.

"The family child care piece, 100 percent, was implemented because of the tragedy," said Rubin, an advocate with the Dallas-area nonprofit ChildCareGroup.

Rubin and other advocates say registered family homes often give parents a false sense of security because of the homelike environment, when they're less-regulated by the state than child care centers.

"It's a little bit of a stepchild, actually, as far as the attention it gets," she said of family homes. "What we can do to keep them safer is good for Texas."

Failed efforts

Legislation was the only hope for changes after other avenues of improving training had failed. The state department that oversees child care licensing had recommended more training but ended up tabling its own recommendations over concern about how much they'd cost parents.

"I just think increasingly, everybody, all the stakeholders agreed that this was something important and something that needed to happen," said Sul Ross, a former state licensing director who now works as a vice president for the

Houston nonprofit Collaborative for Children. "The past issue has mainly been the cost of doing that, but I just think in the industry, they've realized, look, these teachers have just got to have more training."

Michael Gallagher, an attorney for the mother of two fire victims, applauded the changes, even if he wasn't sure how much good they'd do. His client, Tiffany Dickerson, is suing the state, claiming it was grossly negligent in licensing Jackie's Child Care.

"While it may satisfy some of the legislators, I doubt that it would satisfy any of the people involved in this incident," Gallagher said.

No one can say whether better training would have changed Tata's mind about leaving the children alone. Was her decision born of immorality or a lack of education? Or both?

Gallagher offered this: "It takes no training whatsoever to understand that you ought not to leave preschool-age children in a home alone. ... But maybe something in the training might drive the point home, in a dramatic enough fashion."

Baby steps

What happened at Jackie's Child Care, he said, should be used in all training programs as an example of what can happen "if you just momentarily leave children alone."

The new training requirements aren't a fix-all. They are baby steps. But they are progress. On behalf of the about 1 million Texas children in child care, thank you, lawmakers, for making this a priority. Now it's up to the governor to make it a reality.

lisa.falkenberg@chron.com



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jefferysjefferson 7:54 AM on May 25, 2011

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In the USA a baby risks death from the "choice" of the "mother". Then there is the risk of death from the "mother" putting the child in a human kennel.

We apparently care for for the "choices" of the "mother" then the welfare of the baby.

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