

Iowa Child Care Providers Under Spotlight



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In the past two years, there have been reports of at least five deaths in child care across Iowa; health experts blame poor oversight and lack of training.

Child and family advocate organizations are trying to raise awareness to better protect the safety, and the very lives of young children by strengthening state child care regulations.

Cindy Meyer of Mason City, Iowa currently cares for 13 children. She's been a registered in-home child care provider for the past 21 years.

To become a [registered provider in Iowa](#), applicants are required to fill out a form, submit to checks for criminal and abuse history and adhere to annual safety training.

Director of Every Child Counts Sheila Hansen calls the process simple.

"To be a registered provider in Iowa, fill out some basic paperwork. I know a lot of childcare providers who have been in the business for 10 or 15 years and they've never received a visit by the Iowa Department of Human Services or they've received one visit," said Hansen.

As a registered provider, Meyer admits the state has visited her home once in 21 years.

"They're supposed to be making them once a year but because of the system they're only making the checks if there is a problem," said Meyer.

In a 2009-2010 ranking of child care standards and oversight by The National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, Iowa scored toward the bottom of the list along with Indiana, Idaho, Louisiana and Mississippi.

The report has scored Iowa poorly in the past because of weak inspections, incomplete background checks, minimum education requirements and poor health and safety practices.

"The registered providers don't get a lot of monitoring and the unregistered providers don't get any monitoring at all. Those are taxpayer dollars that are going to those homes and we don't monitor them," said Hansen.

According to the Iowa Department of Human Services there are more than 1400 licensed centers, 5000 registered in-home child care providers and 4000 non-registered in-home care providers across the state.

Despite a state sweep of criminal history, some providers do not bear a clean background, including burglary, drug paraphernalia, drunker driving, theft and trespassing charges or convictions.

"In-home providers are required to have record checks and child abuse checks but only state records... only state criminal records are checked," says Roger Munns, spokesman for the Iowa Department of Human Services. "The intent of the legislature is for that to change... and then of course the unregulated providers... you take your chances."

Some say more needs to be done to protect the state's youngest residents

"When I get my hair cut my beautician has a certificate on the wall that says she's met a minimum level of qualifications and she's been visited, meaning someone has gone to that location and checked it out," said Hansen. "But when I take my child into a home, there's nothing on that wall that says they've been visited."

The DHS says the system is fragmented and the department is faced with the reality of a rocky economy.

"We don't have enough resources to do the job as well as we'd like to," said Munns.

Advocates believe children are being cast in the shadows of political resistance.

"People are afraid of regulation, but when it comes to the health and safety of young children I don't think we can have too many

regulations,” said Hansen.

Efforts in the past to make changes to the current system have been struck own.

“There didn’t seem to be much political energy to have more regulation. In fact, there’s no doubt about it. There was very little energy for that,” said Munns.

The Iowa Department of Human Services set a target goal to visit 60% of home daycares in 2011 with the intent to license them all by 2013.

However, Iowa DHS spokesman Roger Munns says without more money the goal of inspecting and licensing all home daycares seems unlikely.