

Want safe child care? You're on your own

Jim Fisher

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Do you know how to run a criminal background check on someone? If you're an Idaho parent with the need to have a child cared for while you're at work, you'd better.

So says state Sen. Melinda Smyser, R-Parma. Smyser was the only member of her chamber's Health and Welfare Committee to vote against legislation regulating small child care centers, and one of five senators to vote no on the floor.

Yes, that means the bill passed the Senate. But it now goes to the House, where Smyser's attitude toward regulation is more common.

Some readers will recall the reception similar legislation got two years ago in the House Health and Welfare Committee, where members Tom Loertscher and Steven Thayne argued it would only encourage mothers to leave their homes and their children.

"What can we do to keep Mom at home?" asked Loertscher, R-Iona. Committee members answered by killing the bill.

As things now stand, anyone caring for fewer than 13 children can do so without regulation by the state, and without a license. That means someone can walk out the prison door one day and start a day-care center the next day.

Some buttinskies, including the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, find that objectionable, so much so that the association ranks Idaho last among the 50 states in protecting children in child care - right behind Louisiana. But Smyser and others say it's up to parents to make sure the care for their children is adequate.

"You want to leave your children in a good place, so it's your responsibility as a parent to check that out," she says.

But it's not that simple, says Karen Mason of the Idaho Association for the Education of Young Children.

"Parents are telling us they need help," Mason says. "They can't go into a child care program and know that the water is tested and ... they meet the (required)

temperature in the fridge. They are assuming that someone's checking, and that's not the case."

Someone is checking such things at centers caring for 13 or more children, so how important is it that no inspector is at the places the legislation targets? According to Mason's organization, it leaves 70 percent of child care providers free of the need for a criminal background check, and more than half of Idaho's child care centers without a requirement to follow minimal health and fire safety guidelines.

And three out of five children under the age of 5 are now in child care - whether Tom Loertscher likes it or not. - J.F.