

2ndOpinion

READER'S VIEW CHILD CARE

Idaho needs tighter rules for those who watch kids

BY LINDA JENSEN

Idaho is protective. We vehemently strive to protect our rights, our property, our resources and our way of life.



The Idaho way of life values individual rights and personal responsibility. We continue to cling to the notion that, with the right amount of effort, anyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and find success. This notion begs the question, "What is the public responsibility to provide systems that protect and support the environments in which our youngest citizens can learn to become responsible?" In other words, what can the government do to help build the foundations, or "boots," that lay the groundwork for individual strength, so that there are, in fact, bootstraps to grab hold of.

One answer is to ensure that the environments in which children live,

grow and develop are safe and provide adequate opportunity for learning. The incident of the day-care operator charged with child abuse in West Ada County after a 1-year-old child suffered a broken leg and deputies found "disgusting" conditions is a case in point where Idaho failed its public responsibility. Idaho child-care licensing standards are ranked worst in the nation, according to the National Association of Childcare Resource and Referral Agencies. The accused child-care center was licensed. For \$100, this bought them and the public very minimal guarantees — a fire inspection, an every-other-year health inspection and criminal history checks. Inspections are usually pre-scheduled, allowing providers to make any improvements that may be needed prior to the visit.

According to Idaho KIDS COUNT, an estimated 71,488 children under the age of six — 56 percent — need some form of child care so their par-

ents can work. Of these, approximately 61 percent are in some form of licensed care and 39 percent are being cared for by legally license-exempt providers. The combination of minimal regulation requirements and lax standards for what is regulated puts many Idaho children at risk.

Ironically, Idaho ranks as one of the more restrictive states for assisted-living licensing standards according to the Idaho Health Care Association (assisted-living facilities provide housing and care for elderly and disabled individuals). The Idaho Health and Welfare State Regulations include 67 pages of regulations that must be met for a provider to operate a facility. This compares to only four pages for child-care licensing. What does this say about Idaho's level of commitment to protect children?

It is past time for Idaho to take a hard look at providing a quality child-care system that both protects and stimulates. This would include:

➤ Developing a child-care licensing statute to provide a foundation of basic health and safety in small businesses that provide care for children.

➤ Providing consistent and rigorous enforcement through more frequent and unannounced inspections.

➤ Developing a cohesive system for receiving, acting upon and tracking reported violations and concerns.

Quality child care is early education and is important for the healthy development of children. Quality child care helps ensure that children grow up healthy and ready to succeed in school. When children don't come to school ready to learn, they are starting at a disadvantage.

Each child's success or lack of success is ultimately Idaho's success or lack of success. It is in Idaho's strategic self-interest to reexamine its position on early care and learning.

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