

Death of baby at Virginia in-home day care not as isolated as it seems ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

A baby girl died last week while at an in-home day care in Prince William County. It seemed like one of those awful, isolated tragedies.

It is, but this story has many layers.

It so happens that childcare advocates and experts from across the country were in Washington when news of the girl's death broke. They were trying to get legislators to recognize that children across the country are far too vulnerable in dangerously under-regulated in-home daycare.

Child Care Aware, the group (previously known as the National Association of Child Care Resources and Referral Agencies) meeting in D.C., simultaneously released a report spelling out the issues.

Nearly 15 percent of children in childcare are in in-home care in the U.S., but there is no legal agreement on when those childcare homes should be licensed and what a safe, healthy childcare home should be.

Some states don't inspect sites, some don't require any training (even CPR). Others don't require background checks or check against the sex offender registry. Plus, there's no standard agreement on what the child-to-adult ratio should be.

Certainly, many in-home cares are safe, loving alternatives. They often offer more flexibility and convenience than larger centers. They are also sometimes more affordable.

All too often, however, they come with risks.

Police have said the home day care where the girl died in Virginia was likely illegal. Two adults were looking after 23 children, six of them under 1 year old, in that Bristow home.

Though that particular childcare home may have been outside legal bounds, it was not that far outside. And, given the overall lack of regulation, the line between legal and illegal is blurrier than parents might suspect.

Virginia ranks among the worst states for oversight surveyed in the Child Care Aware report. The state does not require any licensing until a provider has taken in seven children who are not related to them. That means a provider can watch over six children in addition to her own children before she has to meet any licensing requirements at all.

The District and Maryland did much better in the survey, both ranking in the top 10. Even that is no great honor considering the standards are so low across the board.

For instance, in D.C., providers do not have to undergo background checks or checks of sex offender registries, according to the report.

In Maryland, providers are allowed to care for up to eight children at a time. There's also no mandate to check a provider's juvenile records.

The danger is not just a theoretical threat. I attended a portion of Child Care Aware's conference and heard a few real horror stories.

In Missouri, for example, 54 babies have died in childcare in the last 55 months - most of them at in-home day care where providers did not know safe sleep procedures.

Advocates are not asking for much. They'd like to see the federal childcare block grant legislation revised to recognize that providers who receive taxpayer grants meet basic requirements. They'd also like the states to ask more of providers.

Or, as Child Care Aware's chief of policy, Grace Reef, phrased it: "There should be minimum protections for children."

-reprinted from the Washington Post

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