

Feds propose child care center safety steps, employee background checks ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Federal health officials say they will propose to overhaul federally funded child care centers across the country, beefing up safety standards including background and fingerprint checks for employees and requiring states to better monitor the facilities.

Roughly 1.6 million U.S. children attend child care centers on subsidies from the federal government. But health, safety and program quality requirements for those facilities vary widely and states monitor them through a patchwork of rules, according to three senior administration officials, who spoke about the proposed rules to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly before the officials announcement.

The proposed changes are part of a broader agenda by President Barack Obama to ensure health and safety across all early learning environments and to improve the quality of facilities and their workers to prepare children for kindergarten.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services officials said the rules would increase accountability among child care providers and improve transparency so parents know more about the facility their child is attending. States would have to comply with the standards to receive the federal funds.

Workers would undergo fingerprinting and background checks and be required to receive training in first aid, CPR, safe sleeping for babies and poison prevention, the officials said. The proposal also would set guidelines for transporting children in an effort to reduce the number of deaths of children left in cars.

States also would be required to conduct unannounced, in-person inspections at each child care center. States vary widely on how they monitor child care centers, with some allowing self-certification for facilities to check off on a mailed-in form whether they have smoke detectors and safety plans. That wouldn't fly under the new rule, the officials said.

Many parents mistakenly think their child care facilities are already following these measures, and the officials said they want to better inform families about facilities' track records. The proposed rules would require all states to post licensing, health and safety inspection records online in plain language. About 30 states already do so, officials said.

The rules also would require all states to use a rating system for quality issues, including curriculum and learning environment. About half the states already use such a system.

Accessibility to government-funded child care also is addressed. The proposal would encourage states to give more flexibility to families and to address care for children while unemployed parents look for work.

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