

Child Care Benchmarks Low Among States

Report finds much room to improve standards and oversight across nation

A report card that looked at standards and oversight of child care programs across America gives states unimpressive grades overall for regulations governing benchmarks related to child care quality, including staff:child ratios, hiring standards, safety requirements and the frequency of inspections.

Only the Department of Defense, which operates its own child care system, earned more than 90 out of 150 possible points, raising questions about the quality of child care throughout the nation, according to the 2007 report released by the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (NACCRRA).

"The results of this report card should be a wake-up call to policymakers," said Linda K. Smith, executive director of NACCRRA. "With the well-being of nearly 12 million children under age 5 at stake, states need to make sure that children are safe and learning in child care."

Average Scores Low

The average total score among the states was 70 out of 150 possible points.

The Department of Defense received the highest score – 117 points – and had the highest point totals in both categories. The next highest overall score – 90 points – was given to Illinois and New York. Idaho scored the lowest, receiving 15 points.

No state was ranked in the top 10 for both the standards and the oversight categories.

Pennsylvania earned a total 79 points, good enough for an overall rank-

ing of 15th in the report.

The state earned its highest marks in standards, ranking fourth in that category. It fared poorly, however, in oversight, ranking 40th among all states, the District of Columbia, and the Department of Defense.

States were scored based on a point system of 100 points for child care standards and 50 for oversight.

To determine the rankings for child care standards, NACCRRA scored states on several aspects of their minimum standards for child care centers. These included staff:child ratio, group size requirements, educational qualifications of directors and teachers, pre-service and annual training requirements for teachers, criminal background checks, developmental domains programs must address, health and safety requirements, and parent involvement, communication, and parental access.

For the oversight rankings, states

Unimpressive Report Card

States fared poorly overall in an analysis of child care oversight and standards. No state ranked in the top 10 in both benchmark categories and no state earned more than 90 out of 150 points, meaning none scored higher than 60%.

were scored on elements of their oversight regulations, including whether both child care centers and family child care homes are licensed, frequency of inspections, the number of programs for which each inspector is responsible, educational requirements for licensing staff, and whether inspection reports and complaints reports are available online to parents.

NACCRRA said the benchmarks were developed from available research in the field.

Improvements Urged

Among the common problems found among the states were infrequent inspections, deficient safety requirements and low hiring standards for child care center employees.

NACCRRA, as part of its report, recommends that Congress strengthen the Child Care and Development Block Grant to better ensure that children are safe and learning while in child care. The CCDBG

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is the primary federal funding source for child care in the United States. Under the block grant, minimum health and safety requirements for states are extremely broad.

The report also calls on states to strengthen their standards by taking steps such as reducing staff:child ratios, requiring more extensive training and education of the workforce, and requiring that child care centers meet 10 basic health and safety standards.

Pennsylvania's low ranking in oversight appears largely due to findings that it does not meet recommendations for programs-to-licensing-staff ratios, and that it does not make inspection reports and complaint reports available online to parents.

Inspectors in Pennsylvania are each responsible for an average of 153 child care programs. NACCRRA scores are based on the recommendation that each inspector be responsible for no more than 50 programs.

In Pennsylvania, monitoring visits of child care centers are done once a year, according to the NACCRRA report card. The recommended frequency of those visits is four times a year.

Standards Key To Quality

When it comes to benchmarks related to child care standards, however, Pennsylvania earned much higher overall marks.

Adequate child care standards are considered the foundation for ensuring the quality of early care and education and creating and maintaining a safe environment for young children.

"From a practitioner point of view, a standard gives you a clear, concrete picture of what quality is, so you know what you are striving for. You know what it should look like," said Laurie

Mulvey, director of the Division of Service Demonstrations, University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

"Without standards, there is a general sense among practitioners that they want to be quality, but everybody has their own ideas about what that is."

Pennsylvania received its highest marks in the standards category for requiring parent involvement, communication and allowing parental visits, as well as for requiring programs to address six developmental domains: social, physical, language/literacy, cognitive/intellectual, emotional, and cultural.

Keystone STARS Helped

Child care advocates and experts familiar with programs in Pennsylvania say the state's Keystone STARS program played a key role in raising the state's ranking in the standards category.

Keystone STARS is an initiative of the Department of Public Welfare's Office of Child Development and Early Learning to improve, support, and recognize the continuous quality improvement efforts of early care and education pro-

grams in the state. It is designed to encourage providers to improve the quality of their programs by offering them incentives, support, and assistance. Providers, for example, can earn financial rewards for achieving up to five levels of performance standards.

Each level builds on the previous one and uses research-based best practices to promote quality early learning environments and positive child outcomes. These standards address issues such as staff qualifications and professional development, early learning, partnerships with family and community, and leadership and management.

"The standards that we have under Keystone STARS touch on all aspects of quality -- everything that the literature says you should do to improve the lives of children and their families, help educate children, and help nurture them," said Mulvey. "They pull quality apart and give providers clear standards at increasing levels so they keep trying to get higher and higher."

**references**

This report is based on the following publication:

We Can Do Better: NACCRRA's Ranking of State Child Care Center Standards and Oversight. March 2007. Washington, DC: National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies. This report is available online at: www.naccrra.org/policy/scorecard.php

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