

Bill Ramping Up Preschool Inspections Killed

Posted: Tuesday, May 31, 2011 1:49 pm | Updated: 7:04 pm, Mon Jun 6, 2011.

• **by Emily Alpert**

A bill that would have ramped up the frequency of state inspections for preschools and child care programs died on Friday, stagnating in a committee.

That means that California can still leave those programs uninspected for as long as five years, as we explained last week. Licensing inspectors say that puts health and safety at risk. California regularly ranks at the bottom in national studies of preschool and child care oversight.

Backers argued the bill wouldn't cost any more money because licensing inspectors would do shorter, annual inspections focused on the most frequent or worrisome violations, only launching a more detailed inspection if they detected a severe problem. The idea was born out of the Community Care Licensing Division itself, which has championed the changes and tested them on its own.

But a state legislative committee analysis still found that the increased inspections would cost "tens of millions of dollars." Though no explanation was given at the committee on Friday, backers of the bill believe it was likely killed off by worries that it would cost the strapped state more money.

"It's dead," said Donita Stromgren, policy director for the California Child Care Resource and Referral Network. "We'll have to regroup and figure out what the issues were that we're not aware of. We thought we had addressed their concerns. ... It's a major surprise."

The bill would have also increased the frequency of inspections for facilities that care for the elderly and foster children, which also fall under the Community Care Licensing Division.

In the meantime, I'm still digging into the impacts of infrequent inspections for preschools and child care programs. Do you have tips or information to share? Please let me know!

Please contact Emily Alpert directly at emily.alpert@voiceofsandiego.org or 619.550.5665 and follow her on Twitter: twitter.com/emilyschoolsyoud.

How to Look Up Your Preschool's Record

Posted: Monday, May 23, 2011 3:03 pm | *Updated: 1:51 pm, Tue May 31, 2011.*

How to Look Up Your Preschool's Record

- by Emily Alpert

After reading our article about the [infrequency of preschool and child care inspections](#), a father with a two-year-old emailed me to ask: How can we check out a preschool or child care program and see what issues it has had?

Unlike many other states, California doesn't put information about child care licensing violations online. This is one of the things that it gets dinged for when child care licensing here is compared with other states. California doesn't rate preschools, either, though it's beginning to explore the idea.

Inspection reports must be available for public review at the sites for three years. If serious problems are found, the report is supposed to be publicly posted for 30 days and copies should be given to all parents who are currently enrolled or enrolling over the next year.

But if you want to know the full story, the best way is to check out the complete file kept by the department that licenses and inspects preschools and child care programs.

If you know the name of a preschool or child care program that you want to check out, you can phone 619.767.2200 to set up an appointment to view a facility file at the Mission Valley offices of the Community Care Licensing Division. The file includes any investigations and inspection reports.

Here in San Diego, it often includes an informal log of every time the program has been contacted, which will tell you when the last state inspection was and why (for instance, whether state evaluators were checking out a specific complaint or doing a routine visit).

If the facility has ever been on probation, the file will include reports about what led up to it and how it was resolved. Looking at the whole record can show you if the program has had a history of problems with cleanliness, for example, or if it has often overrun the required teacher-to-student ratio or had even more serious violations.

Got more questions about preschool and child care licensing? Thoughts about what we should explore next? Please let me know!

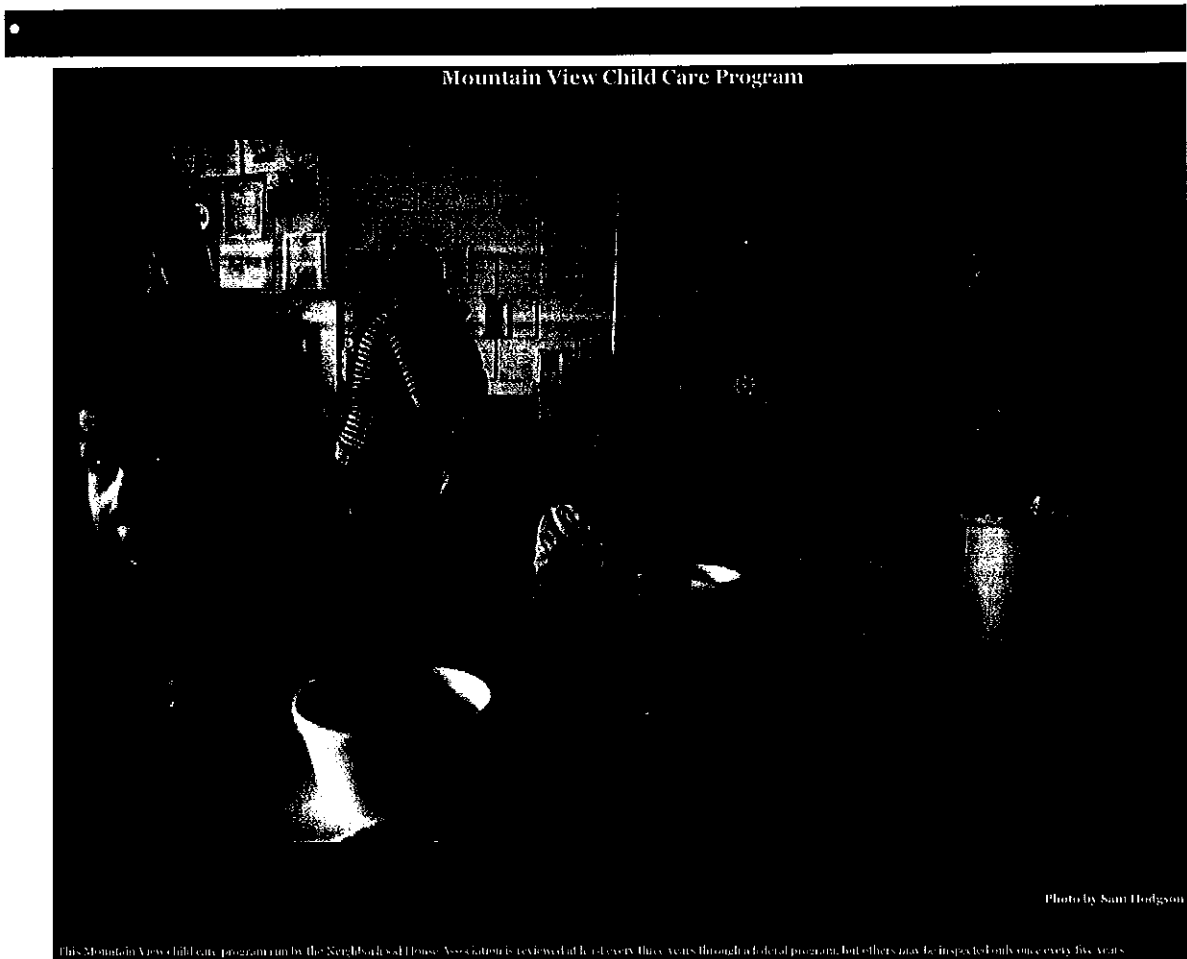
Update: Public information officer Oscar Ramirez also sent along [this link](#) to the licensing division's website, which provides more tips for parents who are trying to find licensed care for their kids. Thanks Oscar!

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Preschools Checked Less than Dog Kennels

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• by Emily Alpert



Dog kennels are inspected once a year in San Diego County. Restaurants get vetted twice as often. But here and across California, preschools and child care centers can go five years without a checkup from state evaluators — and sometimes even longer.

State inspectors from the Community Care Licensing Division hasten to investigate complaints such as rat infestation and the manhandling of kids within 10 days. Caregivers are supposed to report injuries or other incidents themselves and can get slapped with a citation if they don't.

But if nobody phones the state agency to tell them something has gone wrong, a preschool or child care center could go years without anyone stopping by to scrutinize if playgrounds are safe, blankets are clean and dangerous criminals aren't on the payroll. The rules were severely slackened eight years ago. Inspections used to happen annually. Now they can occur just twice a decade.

California inspectors had the highest caseloads nationwide, according to [a 2008 study](#). Sometimes they don't even make it to preschools or child care programs in those five years.

"Things can really deteriorate. Broken toys. Broken fences. Guns being left out — not deliberately, but people forget," said Debbie Macdonald, executive director of the YMCA Childcare Resource Service, based in San Diego, which refers parents to preschools and child care providers. "Without another set of eyes saying, 'You need to change some of these toys out, your bathrooms aren't clean,' it's easy for things to slide by."

The state has fallen short of a bar that national experts say is perilously low in the first place. A leading industry association recommends that child care programs be visited four times a year, 20 times more often than California requires. It ranked California 50th out of 52 states and districts in child care licensing and oversight in a recent national study.

That means that California children who toddle in preschools or are cared for after school are less protected from undetected lapses in safety than kids elsewhere. While other states and some pilot programs have moved ahead to [rating preschools](#) on how well they prep kids for learning, California is still shoring up its basic guarantees that children are at least healthy and safe.

Some programs still get checked on more often: If a preschool or child care program is on probation or faces a pending accusation, it has to be visited annually. Thirty percent of programs are supposed to be visited randomly each year, which means that some centers could be visited two years in a row.

Some centers are also under the umbrella of Head Start or other programs that do added inspections. Cities may require fire inspections from time to time too, bringing in another set of eyes.

And complaints help investigators root out problems that they can't spot themselves. Last summer, someone complained that a Bay Point State Preschool staffer used duct tape to bind a child's hands, spurring an investigation. The Point Loma preschool said it planned to remove

the employee and retrain others. Complaints elsewhere have found problems like lax supervision and kids being grabbed by the arms.

However, it's hard to pin down what could be going wrong when inspectors come less frequently, since inspectors aren't there to see it. Katy Kenshur, past president of the San Diego County Family Child Care Association, said she knows some child care programs have packed in more kids than they should.

"They're not too worried about it because they don't think they'll get caught," Kenshur said.

The Boys and Girls Club program at Mendoza Elementary in Imperial Beach had gone almost six years without a visit until an inspector stopped by last week and found everything was well.

Its supervisor Rebecca Bazner strained to remember the previous visit, surprised to realize it had been that long.

"All of a sudden I realized years had gone by and there hadn't been a visit," Bazner said. She remembered back when she started working in child care, inspectors came every year.

The system eroded with the shaky finances of the Golden State. Up until eight years ago, California was supposed to inspect child care centers annually. That includes preschools, which typically run only part of the day, and child care programs, which may last all day and can include older kids. If someone cared for children in their own home, they were visited every three years.

But the licensing department was falling short. To help it cope with budget woes, lawmakers decided to pare back inspections to where they are today — once every five years.

The department still struggled to meet that new, lower bar. Five years ago, a state audit found it had only done 68 percent of the required and random visits it was supposed to do. Some programs had gone without a visit for so long that none of the same staffers were there when inspectors came back.

"They didn't even realize they were licensed by us," said Jeffrey Hiratsuka, deputy director of the Community Care Licensing Division.

The department got temporary help to clean up backlogs a few years ago. But the problems persisted. Hiratsuka estimated the agency made almost all the mandatory inspections that were triggered by complaints last year, but only made about half of the random visits to check in.

Its total budget has actually grown overall during the past decade, from roughly \$77 million to \$94 million. But the department says it still struggled to keep pace because it faced booming

caseloads and gained new responsibilities, such as licensing foster homes. Last year, it estimated it had lost 30 percent of the staff needed to do the required inspections, even after a slight rebound in staffing.

"We've sucked the guts out of it," said Marcy Whitebook, director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at University of California, Berkeley. "It's so rolled back that it feels like, 'Come on. This is ridiculous.'"

Back when the inspections were first loosened, California put a trigger in place so that if violations went up more than 10 percent, inspectors would make random visits more often. But after violations exceeded that twice, California ended up taking out the trigger, since more inspections just turned up more violations.

A new bill would try to ramp up inspections for preschools and child care centers to once a year. Family homes that provide child care would be visited every other year. It would also crank up monitoring of other facilities that care for foster children or the elderly.

The idea would push through changes that the department was already trying to introduce on its own. Last year in a letter to the Department of Finance, it wrote that "fluctuations in resources have put client health and safety at risk." Experts believe the change could catapult California from the bottom to near the top in child care inspections. Many preschools say they'd welcome more frequent visits.

"It used to be a routine visit, checking in and seeing if everything is going well," said Stephanie Alexander, director of St. Andrew's Lutheran Preschool near the border of La Mesa and San Diego. "Now when we get a visit it feels like they're looking for something wrong."

Backers of the bill say the changes wouldn't cost any more money because inspectors would use a quicker checklist of the most frequent or worrisome violations, only launching a more detailed inspection if they detect a severe problem. Inspectors can still cite any problems they spot. But the idea is to save time by focusing first on big problems, such as poisons in kids' reach, instead of smaller or more technical ones.

A state legislative committee analysis still found the changes would cost "tens of millions of dollars," which has put the bill on pause and left its proponents scrambling to show a crucial committee that it won't cost anything at all.

"It's just like if you're driving down the freeway and you know there's no California Highway Patrol around," said Donita Stromgren, policy director for the California Child Care Resource and Referral Network. "You're going to speed more."

Have you had issues with safety or licensing requirements at your preschool or child care center? Do you run a child care program that has been affected by the cutbacks in inspections? Please contact Emily Alpert directly at emily.alpert@voiceofsandiego.org or 619.550.5665 and follow her on Twitter: twitter.com/emilyschoolsyou.

Want Preschool? Just Sign Here -- And Here, Here and Here

Want Preschool? Just Sign Here -- And Here, Here and Here



Sam Hodgson

At an orientation at V.I.P. Village, three-year-old Maximiliano Garcia reaches for some of the forms required to apply.

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Want Preschool? Just Sign Here -- And Here, Here and Here By EMILY ALPERT

The morning clouds had yet to burn off, but the line of anxious moms and dads already stretched out the door and past the playground at Valencia Park Elementary. They came loaded with forms and documents -- birth certificates, electricity bills, vaccination records -- hoping to

score a free spot in preschool. "Number 10!" a woman called out, ushering a young couple inside.

Inside a crowded classroom, copying machines hummed as assistants copied forms and clerks weighed their fates. They go through four reams of paper each day, copying each and every sheet. "This? This is slow," said community assistant Blanca Mendez, when asked about the growing line.

One mother in a black baseball cap couldn't provide any paychecks. She told the clerk, Claudia Garcia, that nobody in her family worked. Garcia was skeptical, asking how they got by. Slowly the truth came out. The mom did have a job and was making some money. Garcia broke the bad news, which the mother already suspected: She made too much to get into the program.

"That's just how it works for state preschool," Garcia said before showing her to the door.

When a child turns five, they have a right to go to kindergarten. Free of charge. But preschool is a privilege, despite solid evidence that early schooling can help narrow the achievement gap between wealthy children and their poorer classmates. Only a handful of states offer free preschool to everyone and fewer actually fund it; California voters rejected the idea of universal preschool four years ago.

The result is that right now, preschool is a luxury for those who are rich enough to easily afford it, charity for those who are poor enough to deserve it, and a headache for those stuck in between.

"It stresses me out. I want my daughter to go to school," said Jen Ott, a military mom waiting to see if her daughter qualifies at a South County preschool. Her preschool has to petition the state to not count her military housing allowance as income. "They should just take whoever, regardless of income. They ask repetitive questions over and over. How many times have I got to put my phone number on each piece of paper?"

There are a slew of different programs for preschoolers, but each is saddled with a different set of rules about who can get in. Head Start, a federally funded preschool program, has the strictest income rules. A family of four needs to earn \$22,050 or less to qualify, even in states like California with a high cost of living. State preschools can cover children whose families who make roughly twice as much.

Sometimes preschools have spots for people who earn more, but only if no poorer families sign up. Norma Johnson at the Neighborhood House Association, a social services agency that runs Head Start programs, says that rarely happens.

And getting into a program doesn't always mean a family will stay in if their income later rises. Kids can bounce in and out of some programs if their parents rely on on-and-off work.

Even if a family is unquestionably eligible, there is no guarantee they'll get a spot. State preschools rank families based on their income; foster and homeless kids jump to the top of the list. Right now, more than 18,000 preschoolers are on a countywide waiting list. The problem exists across California: Last year, a Rand Corp. study concluded that less than half of California preschoolers eligible for Head Start or state preschool could actually be enrolled.

And then there are the people who don't make the cut for state programs, but still can't afford private preschool, which can cost between \$600 and \$1,100 a month in San Diego County.

"They may not meet the criteria -- but that doesn't mean they're well off," said Lynn Karoly, a senior economist with the Rand Corp.

For instance, a family with two parents and two kids that earns \$51,000 -- well under the regional median income of \$73,000 -- would likely be shut out of state preschool. They would have to fork over between 16 and 30 percent of their income to get into a private preschool, or not get preschool at all.

One program is trying to change that. First 5 San Diego fosters early childhood programs through a state tobacco tax approved by voters and funds Preschool for All, which pays for free preschool regardless of income. Barbara Jimenez, executive director of First 5 San Diego, said that will provide preschool to 1,080 children this year who wouldn't otherwise get it.

But with limited funds, those programs only exist in some areas and only go so far in filling the gap. Just half of San Diego three- and four-year-olds were in preschool, according to family surveys gathered two years ago by First 5 San Diego. That gap could have big consequences: Scholars say preschool is far more than just a place to park the kids. Children who go to good preschools come to kindergarten already further ahead, primed for reading, math and science through story time, building blocks and the sandbox.

The unmet demand for preschool also means parents must be willing to brave a sea of paperwork to get it. V.I.P. Village, one of the county's biggest public preschools, requires most families to show birth certificates for every child in the house (to verify family size), two consecutive pay stubs or bank statements (to check income), and proof of residence (a rental receipt or current utility bill) -- a rule that sends some parents running to pay the overdue gas bill -- along with dozens of other forms.

Director David Sheppard has even visited homes to check if kids actually live there or are just listing a fake address. Preschool operators are under added pressure to check closely after a

federal audit this spring found that Head Start workers in several states misrepresented earnings to help families get in.

"It could be simpler," said Sonia Abdul, trying to enroll her three-year-old son at V.I.P. "But I write quickly."

Sheppard is still amazed by the process. "I'm surprised they don't throw their hands up and walk out," he said. "Sometimes they get upset -- but they always come back."

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