

State's Failure to Guarantee Child Care Safety Places Children at Risk

Child care is a lynchpin of the state's economy. Families with children cannot work without child care, but because of a lack of state oversight, they struggle to find reliable care that meets even basic health and safety standards.

Two recent federal audits, as well as national studies of state child care licensing requirements and enforcement, concluded that Michigan must provide more frequent on-site monitoring of child care centers and homes to ensure that providers comply with basic health and safety regulations, including criminal record and protective services background checks for employees.

One major reason for Michigan's failure to provide adequate oversight of child care is that the state's child care inspectors have caseloads that are more than three times the nationally recommended standard. The result is that many Michigan parents seeking child care cannot feel confident that the care they find is consistently safe and in compliance with licensing requirements. For low- and moderate-income parents—including parents who are required to work 40 hours a week as a condition of receiving public assistance—the choices are even more limited. Unable to afford higher quality care or let one parent stay at home when children are young, they face difficult choices with few assurances.

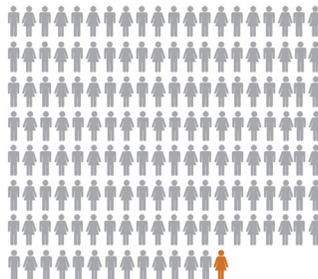
Failing Our Kids in Michigan

Number of child care centers and homes for each child care licensing inspector

50:1



153:1



FINDINGS SHOW SHORTCOMINGS

Findings of the federal audits and reports reveal shortcomings in Michigan's child care inspections:

- ▶ **Child care inspectors in Michigan have average caseloads of 153, more than three times the recommended ratio of 1 worker for every 50 child care programs.** In May of 2014, the state employed 68 child care licensing inspectors who were responsible for 10,397 child care facilities.¹
- ▶ **Unannounced federal site visits to licensed child care centers and homes in Michigan found that the providers they observed failed to comply with one or more state health and safety licensing requirements.** The findings of the federal audit were disturbing, including:

- Half of the family and group child care providers did not do required criminal record and protective services background checks.
- Of the three child care centers they visited, none had completed required criminal record and protective services check on employees.
- Other violations in the centers included a blocked fire exit, hazardous substances within the reach of children, a recalled safety crib, unsupervised toddlers, and one caregiver for 11 children in a mixed group that included 3-year-olds.

► **A study of state child care center regulations and oversight across the country gave Michigan an overall “D” grade and a rank of 29th in the country.²**

- Ineffective monitoring undercuts even the strongest of standards.³ Michigan received a total of 92 out of a possible 150 points (61% or a D grade) for its combined licensing requirements and oversight ability. So, while Michigan was one of only 16 states to address in its child care rules all of the 20 basic health and safety requirements recommended by national pediatric experts, it failed to ensure that child care centers and homes were actually following the rules.
- Based on research that shows that frequent, unannounced inspections make a difference in the quality of care, national organizations recommend that child care centers be inspected prior to being licensed and at least quarterly thereafter, including fire and health/sanitary inspections. In Michigan, centers and group homes (with up to 12 children and two providers) are inspected by licensing staff every two years at renewal. In addition, on the off year, they are supposed to have interim inspections, although due to low staffing, not all interim inspections are completed.
- In addition to visits by state child care inspectors, Michigan centers are required to have a fire safety inspection every four years and an environmental health inspection every two years—if they prepare and serve food onsite, and/or have a private well or sewer.

Taken together, Michigan falls far below the standard of four visits per year.

► **Michigan was one of eight states that received a score of 0 out of a possible 150 points for its program and oversight licensing requirements for family child care homes (with up to six children in the provider’s home).**

- National organizations recommend that family child care homes are also inspected before a license is issued (before children are placed into care) and quarterly thereafter.⁴ Because Michigan was one of eight states that did not inspect homes before registration, and because state law could allow for licensing inspections of homes once every 10 years, it received a final total score of 0.
- Currently, family child care homes in Michigan receive a 90-day inspection after their registration is issued. The registration is good for three years and renewal is a paper process. Under state law, 10% of homes in each county that are due for renewal must have an onsite renewal, but the state is currently inspecting



closer to 20%. The result is that while the number of inspections may differ by county, the average child care home might have an on-site visit approximately every six years.

► **Not included in the federal audits and studies are unlicensed child care settings, where more than one-third of state-subsidized children are receiving care.**

- In 2009, 65% of low-income children who were in child care with a state subsidy were in unlicensed settings, often with relatives or neighbors. In an attempt to encourage parents to choose licensed care, the state: (1) reduced payments to unlicensed providers; and (2) required unlicensed providers to participate in training before being able to receive a subsidy.
- By 2012, only 38% of subsidized children were in unlicensed care, but with falling caseloads, there is no evidence that low-income parents were able to find or afford higher-quality care in licensed homes or centers. Instead, they may still be in care with relatives or neighbors without the benefit of a state subsidy or the ability to connect with other supports needed to improve quality and ensure safety.

WHAT MICHIGAN MUST DO TO KEEP PARENTS WORKING AND CHILDREN SAFE

In response to the federal audit findings about the lack of adequate child care inspections, state officials said that implementing a 1:50 ratio would require an increase in licensing staff of 140 positions, a move that would benefit children but is “unlikely at this time as it would require additional resources and funding.” The state agreed to focus its current resources on a subset of child care rules that are considered predictive of overall safety and compliance—a “key indicators” project that is part of Michigan’s new federal Race to the Top – Early Learning grant.

While focusing resources on key indicators of safety and quality could prove promising in the long run, Michigan must make the safety and health of children in child care an immediate priority by increasing the number of child care inspectors, as well as the frequency of unannounced visits of child care centers and homes. The state inspects a range of services in order to protect the public including restaurants, roads and bridges, and grocery stores. Certainly the state’s youngest children who are in child care so their parents can work to support them deserve to be at the top of the list.

ENDNOTES

1. *Some Michigan Child Care Centers Did Not Always Comply With State Health and Safety Licensing Requirements*, Office of Inspector General, Department of Health Human Services (August 2014).
2. *We Can Do Better: 2013 Update: Ranking of State Child Care Center Regulations and Oversight*, Child Care Aware of America (April 2013).
3. Ibid.
4. *Leaving Children to Chance: NACCRRRA’s Ranking of State Standards and Oversight for Small Family Child Care Homes: 2012 Update*, National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (March 2012).