

Movement aims to maintain high standards for child-care facilities in Arlington County



Dayna Smith/For The Post - Marie Mosby plays with one of the children she cares for in her Arlington home where she operates a childcare business in March 2012. Arlington County is proposing eliminating its child care office and turning everything back to the state, which has no regulations for child cares run by religious organizations nor people caring for up to six unrelated children in their home.

By [Brigid Schulte](#), Published: April 1, 2013

Parents, child-care providers and advocates showed up wearing bright yellow to protest Arlington County's proposal to eliminate child-care safety and quality standards and revert to lower state standards. More than 1,000 have signed a petition urging board members not to overturn the county's 40-year-old regulations in order to close a budget shortfall.

Even a group of retired senior military officers has joined the growing chorus of outrage. It plans to release a report on Tuesday on how early learning is critical for national security, the day that board members meet to consider cutting the Office of Child Care Licensing in their budget work session.

“This is a really short-sighted proposal. If anything, Arlington ought to be marching down to Richmond and asking the state to meet their standards,” said retired Air Force Gen. Norman Seip, with Mission: Readiness, a nonpartisan group based in Washington. “The state standards are among the worst in the nation. They shouldn’t be racing the pack to the bottom.”

Seip and the other officers are concerned that the Defense Department has found that poor education is the leading reason why 75 percent of the nation’s 17-to-24-year-olds are ineligible for military service.

“National security is not about tanks and ships. It’s about our men and women,” he said. “So from the first moment that [a] young boy or girl enters the world, we have to give them a solid foundation. It starts in pre-K and child care.”

Arlington County Manager Barbara Donnellan has proposed eliminating the three-person licensing office, a move that would save the county about \$250,000 a year. The office is responsible for permitting, inspecting, monitoring and training providers in all small and medium-size family homes and larger child-care centers.

In reverting to state standards, about 1,000 of the 5,200 children in child care in the county would no longer be in regulated settings. And the rest could be in bigger classes with teachers and directors who are neither monitored as closely nor required to have as much training.

At Tuesday’s work session, board members will consider alternative proposals of keeping one or two staff members in the licensing office and continuing to regulate small homes and other centers exempt from state licensing standards, while leaving larger homes and child-care centers to the state, as is the case in Fairfax County.

Testifying amid a sea of yellow at a recent public comments session, Lauren Adams Harris, executive director of Little Ambassadors’ Academy, said that the county’s high standards ate into her profits because she was required to keep class sizes low. “You could ask, why wouldn’t I want to get rid of these regulations? It sounds great from a business perspective,” she told board members. “But I’m a child advocate. My first and most important job is to give children that one-on-one attention they need. We’re risking the welfare and maybe even the lives of our children.”

The state does not regulate family child-care homes with five or fewer unrelated children, nor child-care centers run by religious organizations and schools. Under Donnellan’s proposal, small family day homes would no longer be inspected nor monitored. Teachers would no longer have to submit to background checks nor receive health and safety training such as CPR and first aid. Nor would they be required, as they are currently, to meet annual training requirements in child development, safe sleeping practices and other topics.

“This is so upsetting to me . . . I had wonderful support from Arlington County,” said Elizabeth Zanetti, who runs a small family home and has been one of the most vocal protesters of dropping

the regulations. “ They came to my house and made sure everything was safe. The classes are such a blessing. They helped me understand how to care for infants and toddlers, what activities to do, how to take care of them if they’re sick, how to watch for abuse, what chemicals to use for cleaning.”

Zanetti, originally from Peru, is an immigrant like an estimated 80 percent of all small family home providers. She, like many others, decided to go into business as a child-care provider as a way to stay home with her own children.

“People who come from all over the world are doing this profession. They’re doing things because their grandmas in their countries did,” she said. “In Peru, you put stuffed animals, blankets, bumpers, pillows, blankets all around the crib, the cuter the better. But you can suffocate babies. I didn’t know any of this until I got the training.”

Zanetti said that just knowing a child-care worker can pop by for an unannounced inspection at any time keeps providers on their toes. “I worry that if some providers, if they don’t have someone coming anymore, they’re not going to care,” she said.

In the past decade, the county licensing office has closed two child-care centers and seven family care homes. According to documents provided by the county, three homes were closed because of abuse or neglect. In one home, inspectors investigated a child with a broken arm and a second-degree burn. In another, an inspector showed up and found no adult present. The remaining four homes were closed for having too many children, boarders or for safety concerns.

Francine Heggs, another small family day home provider who would no longer be regulated, likened the county child-care licensing office to the huntsman in the tale of “Little Red Riding Hood.” “The wolf is unregulated child-care centers and homes,” she told board members. “And the huntsman scoops up kids and keeps them safe.”

Heggs had just spent an evening at one of several free training sessions that the child-care office provides. She and others in her group brainstormed about how special-needs children could play with a parachute, figuring a blind child might like to feel the textures, a deaf child could notice the colors and they might be able to fan a child who couldn’t move.

“I love these workshops,” Heggs said. “I’m always learning something new.”