Child-care centers licensing discussed

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LAFAYETTE — Louisiana is the only state which doesn’t require licensing for child-care centers, but a proposed law could change that this year, about 100 day-care center operators and parents were told here Tuesday night.

From the tone of the crowd, most were in favor of the licensing proposal.

Attention has focused on proposals to license day-care centers in the Lafayette area following the March 14 death of an infant in one center. In an unrelated case, two nursery employees and a day-care facility owner were charged with cruelty to juveniles.

Dr. C.E. Hamilton, a Lafayette pediatrician, told the group that the state’s existing laws for day-care centers are “absolutely toothless and worthless.”

The state requires licensing of any number of occupations, including morticians and beauticians, but licensing for day-care operators is optional in Louisiana, Dr. Hamilton said.

The licensing was mandatory in Louisiana until 1980 when the Legislature lifted the requirement, he said.

Karen Kelso, an epidemiologist with the state Department of Health and Human Resources said that, since the licensing requirement was lifted, the number of hepatitis cases has doubled. A fourth of all hepatitis can be linked to day-care centers, she said.

The viral disease is caused by poor sanitation practices that usually can be avoided, she said.

One center alone has had 150 cases of hepatitis in four years, she said, and the incidence of other diseases such as salmonella and meningitis also has increased since 1980.

The state should require minimum numbers of day-care workers for a certain number of children, and nutrition standards also should be set, Ms. Kelso insisted.

Judy Watts of New Orleans, chairwoman of the state Senate Committee on Child Welfare, said the proposed bill would not only require licensing, it also would provide for other changes from the pre-1980 law.

For example, civil sanctions would be available against a day-care center in violation of regulations. The pre-1980 law allowed for criminal proceedings which weren’t vigorously pursued, according to Ms. Watts.

Fernand Webber, a parent from Metairie, said he learned the hard way that licensing is not required in the state.

He said his son was at one day-care center which required him to wait two weeks before he was allowed to inspect the facility. At another center, he said, he watched an employee give his son a bottle that had been lying in vomit.

Webber warned that licensing would not cure all problems for day-care facilities, but it would provide a way of solving problems.

“I have yet to meet a day-care operator who gives quality care that is opposed to licensing,” he said.