Child care inspection bill advances

By KAREN DIDIER
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The state fire marshal will have to inspect family homes whose residents participate in a federal child care reimbursement program, if the Legislature goes along with a bill passed Tuesday by a Senate panel.

Residents of Louisiana get about $13 million through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Child Care Food Program, said Dee Kelley, executive director of the Louisiana Housing Assistance Corp. in Alexandria, which runs the program.

She said 5,000 homes where 22,000 children are cared for are in the program, which provides $2 per day per child for food reimbursements.

Kelley said the basic requirement for participation in the program is that only six or fewer children can be cared for in the home. There is no income requirement, and there is no ceiling on the number of homes in Louisiana or any other state that can participate in the program, she said.

The federal government recently added to the requirements that the homes must pass fire safety and sanitation inspections. If the inspections are not done, the state will not be allowed to participate in the program, Kelley said.

Senate Bill 350 by Sen. Joe McPherson, D-Alexandria, provides for the state to charge up to $100 for the inspections, but Kelley said the cost will run closer to $35 for both inspections.

The money will be put into a special account to hire at least seven additional employees to do the inspections for the fire marshal. These inspectors also will be taught how to do the sanitation inspections, Kelley said, so that two state employees will not have to go to the homes, many of which are in rural areas.

Some senators said they were unaware of the program's existence and marveled at the leeway in it.

Sen. William Atkins, D-J onesville, wondered whether the state should take part in such a federal giveaway.

"I can't believe Ronnie (President Ronald Reagan) hasn't cut this out," commented Sen. Richard G. Neeson, D-Shreveport.

Kelley said the program is the only way some people can care for children in their homes.

The Senate Judiciary B Committee passed the measure, which now goes to the full Senate for approval.

The committee also gave favorable reports to:

- SB 2, by Atkins, which increases the fee from $3 to $25 for physicians, registered nurses, qualified technicians and chemists who are required to testify in DWI trials.
- SB 330, by Sen. Cliff Newman, D-Lake Charles, which authorizes college or vocational-technical school students who have gotten a DWI to apply for hardship appeal so that they can drive and from school.