Child-care proposals announced

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A group of legislators, worried about reports of sexual and other abuses to children, proposed Thursday reinstating licenses for child-care centers in Louisiana — the only state without such licenses.

“There has been an increase in instances of abuse — lack of food, inadequate staffing and outbreaks of contagious diseases — so it is vital that we begin taking action very soon,” said Sen. Nat Kiefer.

He was one of four sponsors who announced the proposed legislation at a news conference here. The others are Sen. William Jefferson and Reps. Diana Bajois and Avery Alexander.

Under the proposal, all day-care centers — including those operated by religious groups — would be regulated by the state Department of Health and Human Resources.

“The opposition will come once again as before — from the fundamentalist church people,” said Jefferson.

However, he said day care is not a church issue.

“We’re including everybody in this bill, with the exception of part-time centers,” said Ms. Bajois.

Rep. Woody Jenkins, author of the current law which made licensing voluntary in 1981, heard about the proposal and said he would fight it.

In a telephone interview, Jenkins said other regulations now prohibit child abuse. He said the key is whether the state can regulate programs in day-care centers.

“That’s the real issue — what the state will say about the programs,” he said. “It has absolutely nothing to do with the health and welfare of children.”

At the New Orleans news conference, Kiefer said, “We don’t even have the right now to find out if the person working in one of these facilities is a criminal.”

He said 25 to 30 cases of child abuse are reported in New Orleans each year.

“If two or three dozen cases are being reported,” Kiefer said, “I wonder how many are happening and not being reported. We’ve had incidents reported of children being locked into closets.”

“According to the latest statistics we have, there are more preschool children in Louisiana with working mothers than in any other state in the union.”

The announcement came one day after Karen Kelso, a nurse with the state health department, reported that Louisiana is second in the nation in the number of hepatitis cases linked to day-care centers.

She said one of every four cases of Hepatitis A reported in the state can be linked directly to a day-care center.

Between 1976 and 1980, when day-care centers were licensed, Louisiana had hepatitis outbreaks in 44 day-care centers, Ms. Kelso said. Between 1980 and 1983, hepatitis outbreaks were reported in 90 day-care centers.

Hepatitis A is primarily transmitted through oral-fecal contamination, she said. It is most commonly transmitted in day-care centers when employees caring for a number of children fail to wash their hands between diaper changes.

Poor sanitary habits also lead to the transmission of other diseases, she said, such as meningitis and salmonella.