Day Care Regulation Bill Cleared By Panel

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BATON ROUGE — The state has the “responsibility to safeguard children,” who are being cared for in daycare centers, says Lafayette Rep. Kathleen Blanco, one of the co-authors of a bill that passed the House Health and Welfare Committee Friday.

The bill, which was approved 11-2, calls for mandatory licensing and regulations for day care centers. The state now has no law requiring licensing but offers a voluntary plan that many people say is not working.

Cases of child abuse, neglect and overcrowding in daycare centers have been reported and backers of the legislation hope to clear up some of the problems. Most admit that all problems cannot be solved simply by licensing but they hope to be able to thin out trouble spots by putting some teeth in laws regulating them.

Some of the problems sighted in the community have occurred in Lafayette, where an unattended child hanged himself on a Venetian blind cord at one center and a child abuse case was reported at another.

“If we shirk our responsibilities” to adopt regulations for daycare centers “we are doing a disservice to the children of this state,” Blanco says.

Many of the opponents of the bill who addressed the committee are operators of Pentecostal and Assembly of God Church schools. They said they do not like the idea of “government bureaucrats” dictating policy and they fear that the state might dictate what they can teach in the centers.

Opponents of the bill say it does not say what should be taught and is instead directed toward child protection.

Representatives of Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian and Jewish churches testified in favor of the bill.

“Many of the church run centers are excellent,” Blanco says, “And this legislation is not aimed at making them less efficient. But we have to take care of all day care centers in the state and we can’t depend upon everyone operating the centers properly on a voluntary basis.”

Some opponents say the state already has enough laws that directly or indirectly affect daycare centers.

Blanco said there is a serious problem with enforcement of existing laws because it often takes months to go through court battles. “It is almost impossible to shut one down even if there is strong evidence of child abuse,” she said.

Blanco said she fears attempts will be made to amend the bill to exclude some church centers which could make the law “ineffective.”