

The Connection

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DFPS Child Care Licensing Staff Help Keep Kids Safe, Give Parents Peace of Mind

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"We are not safe here."

These words during a routine follow-up inspection at a child care center took Jeannie Young by surprise when a little boy hung back from his group to talk to her. But Young, now a child care licensing supervisor who oversees other field inspectors, knew just what to do. "I need you to know that we will be helping you," she told the boy, after hearing about the alarming way one caregiver had treated another child.

She discreetly got more information from other children who were eager to talk. She heard the same stories. Young immediately called in the help of investigators trained to deal with allegations of abuse or neglect. The caregiver, who had previously been counseled over less serious issues, was removed from the center, Young said.

Across Texas, perhaps a million children are cared for outside their homes each weekday while their parents work or go to school. For those attending one of the state's 22,000 licensed child care centers or other regulated facilities, parents can breathe easier, knowing that state oversight provides some assurance that their children will be safe from harm.

Our goal is to be the "set of eyes" to ensure that these children are being advocated for, Young said. She supervises five inspectors who cover Austin and surrounding areas, visiting licensed homes, registered homes and licensed centers.

Statewide, roughly 400 employees in DFPS's Child Care Licensing Division — including nearly 300 inspectors and investigators — help facilities get licensed, monitor their operations, and investigate allegations of neglect or abuse.

Licensed facilities must be visited at least once a year by law, with follow-up for problems documented by inspectors. With thousands of standards to apply, inspectors target only about half during each annual visit, Young said. But obvious or "plain view" deficiencies will always be acted upon, she added.

Inspectors look at the ratio of children to providers, playground safety, food handling and hand washing, sleeping practices — especially for infants — and much more.

With so many standards, it's not unusual for centers to have deficiencies, which can make child care staff nervous about state



Jeannie Young works at her office on Summit Drive when she is not out in the field. She supervises child care licensing inspectors in the Austin area.

Find Licensed Child Care Online

Parents can locate licensed child care and see whether a facility is licensed and on the agency's Child Care Licensing website. They can also read up on any problems identified at licensed facilities over the past two years there.

Don't Be in the Dark About Child Care

visitors. But Young, once a child care center director herself, as well as a consultant and field inspector, understands both the requirements and how to put them into practice. Though the monitoring process is not meant to be punitive, Young said, the safety and health of the children is the primary concern. And since the state standards represent a minimum, each one has a purpose in reducing risks to children, she emphasized.

“Our mission is protecting the unprotected,” she said.

Toward that end, inspectors strive to help operators of child care facilities meet the required standards. They provide technical assistance, education and in many cases – time – for the providers to make physical improvements or adjust practices.

“Closing down centers is a last resort for us,” said Northwest District Director Amy Woodard. One of four district directors for the state, Woodard is responsible for the large swath of central and northwest Texas that includes Austin, Lubbock, Temple and Abilene.

“What we try to do is go in and educate providers and give them the tools to provide a safe healthy, environment for kids,” Woodard said. But when providers just can’t or won’t comply and children remain at risk, the state must act.

Risks to children can come in many forms.

For instance, centers must be ready to handle a variety of emergency situations. While many centers conduct fire drills and have some type of security system in place, Young asks facility operators to think broadly and proactively about the risks. Some scenarios are not so obvious, like handling an armed and upset parent – a situation Young faced as a director.

“It’s a little too late to come up with a plan of what you are going to do when a parent comes into the building with a gun,” Young tells providers. “You have got to know that ahead of time. What is your move in that situation?”

That day many years ago, Young received a warning call from a dad who was filing for divorce and custody of the children. He told her his wife was on her way, and had a gun. With just a few seconds to react, Young asked her assistant to call 911, and was able to chat with the upset mom until police arrived. But she knows things could have been much worse.

“You can’t anticipate what someone’s going to do when they are in an emotionally fragile state,” she said.

Other risks can come from caregivers who mete out harsh or inappropriate punishments, like the one Young discovered. Child care providers may see disciplining children as a matter of custom or culture, Young said. But state rules define what’s acceptable and put the onus on providers to find safe ways to handle children they consider difficult.

“Get resources to learn how to work with that child or you need to let this child’s parents know that group care is not the best option for this child,” Young advises operators and staff. “Don’t put them in a situation that ends up being potentially very dangerous for them.”

And while it’s her job to think about what can go wrong, and make sure that child care facility operators do, too, Young is quick to point out that the vast majority take the necessary corrective actions in the time allowed.

“They use that time period to really make their staff understand, ‘OK, here are the standards. This is what we must be doing. Here’s why we must be doing this.’ And it makes their program a better program,” Young said.

Meanwhile, hundreds if not thousands of unlicensed – and therefore illegal – operations are not monitored at all. These operations have flown largely under the state’s radar until 2013, when the legislature provided funding to the agency to proactively seek them out. Thirty inspectors, along with additional supervisors and support staff were hired to carry out the initiative.

The unit is now looking at everything from Craigslist to Facebook to the signs at the local laundry room to find illegal operations, Woodard said. The agency is not just going after these places to close them down, she added, but to educate owners on what is involved in running a licensed operation and make tools available to help them get started.

“Obviously, if they don’t comply and they continue to care for children, we’ll take other action,” she said.

So far, the new unit has closed 76 operations they found operating illegally due to risks they posed to children, according to Julie Richards, HHS coordinator for child care licensing.

Both Thompson and Woodard urge parents to do their homework when it comes to choosing care for their children. A licensed facility means that certain health and safety standards must be met, and that someone else is looking at the operation with your child’s well being in mind.

“Always choose regulated care,” Woodard urged. “Otherwise there is no one in there ensuring the safety of your children. Children are not always just unsafe because a person is bad. Sometimes people are just uneducated on what children need or the latest safety things.”

“Child care is not where you want to bargain,” she added. “Child care is where you will have to budget for quality care.”