

DWL: Daycare Without a License ©2009 by Alan Guttman

It's one thing to know that thousands of children in the state, birth to five-years old, are being cared for in homes that are not licensed by the California Department of Social Services' Community Care Licensing Division. And this is to be expected since there are many parents who don't work, don't need child care, and are able to stay home and raise their young children. It's another thing to know that for those parents who are working and need child care, thousands of children spend their days in the unlicensed homes of grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, or close family friends. And this too is no surprise as it's been said that it *takes a village* (e.g. relatives and friends) *to raise a child*. In such unlicensed settings there are no minimum physical indoor and outdoor space requirements or mandatory adult:child ratios to ensure for the child's health and safety. Nor are there regulations that require the caregiver to have a Child Development Program Teacher Permit or previous experience working with young children. In other words, the state can't tell us how to raise our young children, can't mandate that grandma have an Associate of Arts degree, or require my next door neighbor to take core child development courses at a local community college. After all, we don't want the state invading our homes, the homes of our relatives, or the homes of neighbors as a result of the early care and education decisions we make for our children. That is, unless the state of California is paying for the care and education of our young children. In which case one would expect that the state should not only be fully aware of how and where its funds are being spent, but that there should be some accounting for the quality of care being provided at the taxpayers' expense.

And so it's an entirely startling thing to know that thousands of young children of working parents are not only being cared for in the unlicensed homes of relatives, neighbors, or strangers, but that such "license-exempt care" for thousands of children is being subsidized by the state of California and its taxpayers. The CalWORKS (California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids) program provides cash aid and services to "eligible needy California families." In general, low-income parents transitioning from welfare to work are eligible for state subsidized child care, including license-exempt care, if they are working or attending an approved education or training program. Most license-exempt care subsidized by CalWORKS is not monitored for minimum levels of quality, including basic assurances for the health and safety of the children being cared for. Clearly the CalWORKS program's primary focus is on getting parents off of welfare and back into the workforce. No, I am not advocating for the elimination of the child care subsidies provided by the program. As many parents who transition from welfare back to work are employed in lower paying jobs, the cost of child care would consume a large percentage of their earnings without the CalWORKS subsidy. What I do think is necessary for the CalWORKS child care subsidy program is a major effort to: 1.) require basic levels of quality for child care including minimum health and safety standards for all license-exempt providers who accept state subsidies; 2.) monitor the quality of license-exempt care being paid for by the state; 3.) build on and enhance existing quality improvement and training initiatives for license-exempt care providers; and 4.) include license-exempt child care in any *quality rating and*

improvement system (QRIS) recommended by the newly established Early Learning Quality Improvement System Advisory Committee. The issue of CalWORKS funded license-exempt care must be a part of this committee's "...comprehensive effort to improve the child care and development system of the state..."

The legislation establishing this advisory committee (Senate Bill 1629), also calls on its members to address the

development of a funding model aligned with the quality rating scale for child care and development programs that serve children from birth to five years of age...

In other words, the legislation is essentially requiring the committee to consider a system for linking the amount of the state subsidy that a provider could receive to the quality of the child care and development services being provided. In such a "tiered reimbursement" system, providers offering higher quality care and education services would receive a higher reimbursement rate (subsidy). This brings us full circle to the most shocking fact about the state's child care subsidy system. Under the current system, in many, if not most cases, "licensed" child care providers subsidized by the state, including public school and private non-profit operated center-based programs, are reimbursed at a significantly lower rate than "license-exempt" child care providers. These licensed programs must meet all Community Care Licensing rules including complying with basic health and safety standards, hiring qualified staffing, maintaining minimum adult to child ratios, and meeting indoor and outdoor space requirements. So where is the logic, where is the funding model aligned with quality, indeed what are we saying about how we value our young children if license-exempt child care providers, who are not required to meet any of these requirements, are reimbursed by the state at a higher rate than licensed providers?