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Comptroller's office recommends changes to state's child care monitoring program

NASHVILLE, TENN. – Does Tennessee's child care monitoring program encourage the improvement of child care? Is the program helping parents make informed decisions when choosing child care? Have new state regulations governing child care transportation improved children's safety?

State lawmakers asked the Comptroller's Office of Research to answer these questions. Released today, the resulting report, "Evaluating Child Care: Tennessee's Star-Quality Program," examines the state's child care monitoring program and recommends improvements.

Child care licensure and regulation in Tennessee changed dramatically in 2000, when the state legislature passed reform legislation following several fatal incidents involving child care agencies. The reform legislation created a new method for evaluating child care providers, called the Star-Quality Program.

The Star-Quality Program recognizes child care providers whose programs exceed minimum licensing standards. Participating providers can receive ratings of one, two or three stars, and qualify for financial and regulatory benefits. The Department of Human Services evaluates agencies on physical environment, basic care, curriculum, program structure and interactions with children.

The Comptroller's Office of Research conducted a statewide survey of child care providers and interviewed various stakeholders in preparing the report. Although a majority of survey respondents believed the Star-Quality Program's purpose is clear, respondents differed on whether the program has improved their child care agency's quality.

The report found some providers significantly alter their programs on evaluation day, qualifying for star ratings that do not reflect typical practices. The report recommends the Department of Human Services continue evaluating the effectiveness of current efforts designed to curb this practice.

DHS no longer funds improvement grants, which helped child care providers address deficiencies and boost their evaluation scores. The report recommends restoring grant funding and allowing providers the opportunity to correct their annual evaluation score outside of the appeals process.

The report questions the use of the program's evaluation instrument to determine eligibility for the state's pre-kindergarten program. In addition, it appears the requirement of three-stars to qualify as a pre-kindergarten program may restrict the eligibility of private and non-profit providers. The report recommends DHS and the Department of Education make the pre-kindergarten eligibility standards more consistent for all sites.

The state has not increased child care reimbursement rates since 2005. The report recommends state lawmakers consider increasing these rates to ensure low-income children have equal access to high-quality child care.

One of the Star-Quality Program's primary objectives is to enable parents to make informed decisions when choosing child care. DHS has taken steps to publicize the program but has not conducted a parent survey to evaluate progress in accomplishing this important objective. The report recommends DHS conduct a survey.

The report found that changes to transportation rules and regulations have improved children's safety but also posed significant costs for child care providers.

"Evaluating Child Care: Tennessee's Star-Quality Program," is available on the Comptroller's website at www.comptroller.state.tn.us.

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