

Dealing with careless child-care centers

Tallahassee Democrat - Tallahassee, Fla.

Subjects: Children & youth; Day care centers

Author: Frank, David

Date: Apr 10, 2008

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Section: Local Conversation

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My View

Re: "Embattled child-care center remains open," (news story, April 8).

The Democrat's story about the "embattled" Cradle to Crayons Child Care Center was correct in recognizing that the center continues to operate even despite its legacy of troubles. But from my view, it mischaracterized the extent of those problems.

The report said the center has a "history of minor safety violations" and mentioned only one of many incidents (that bleach was left accessible to very young children). It quoted the Department of Children and Families comment that this was "not unusual for most day-care centers."

What DCF inspectors really found in the two years leading up to the incident involving my clients, were repeated violations of state regulations governing the hiring, training and supervision of staff.

This lack of proper training and supervision led to multiple incidents of sanitation concerns, poisons stored within reach of young children, perimeter fences and gates in disrepair, and unsafe outdoor play areas. Either inadequate background checks, or the owner's desire to save some money on the "hired help," led to a staffer being hired who had a felony criminal record and was, at the very same time, under investigation for another incident of child abuse.

That staffer was the very person who was supposed to be supervising the older child and who left his room and entered the infant room to batter and maul my client, a 7-month-old girl.

But don't fear, DCF swooped in and fined the facility \$200 and it made the owner agree to put a sink in the infant room. The reason given for the absence of the infant staffer on the day of the attack was that she had to go to another room to wash or fill baby bottles. Oh, and one of those numerous "minor" violations before the attack was failing to have a sink in the infant room.

I find it hard to accept the notion that repeatedly exposing infants and very young children to toxins and unsanitary and unsafe conditions, while being poorly supervised by untrained staff (some with criminal and abuse histories), constitutes "minor" problems.

For the sake of all parents in this great community, we better hope that DCF was wrong, that such deplorable and persistent problems are not typical for a child-care center. While DCF's failure to close the center and, instead, imposing only an embarrassing slap-on-the-wrist fine of \$200 may be typical, I believe the seriousness of the owner's misconduct is not.

Whether it was a lack of state oversight or gross profiteering from the owners - or a combination of both - is a question that warrants public outcry. The fact that multiple children weren't seriously injured or killed may be all the proof we need that there really are angels that protect them.

My goal, and the goal of the victims I represent, has been to either shut this place down or to bring in responsible owners who will genuinely care about children. We hope to do so by pursuing collection of the judgment. But the fact that, in the meantime, this facility is still open should shock the public conscience.

As this matter moves forward, we must recognize that the current owners and managers did not protect these children, nor did the government's licensing agency. In the end, it was the citizen jurors who gave of their time, sat and listened to the evidence and rendered a just verdict. These members of our community, our neighbors who served on the jury, will have had the largest impact on whether or not this facility continues to remain open. They play a special role in our society and they have played an important role for the families of this community.

You could even call them angels.

* David M. Frank is a Tallahassee attorney representing victims in the Cradle to Crayons Day Care case. Contact him at davidfrank65@comcast.net.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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