

Report: S.D. lax in child care regulations

Patrick Anderson 11:58 p.m. CDT September 3, 2014



A national child safety advocacy group says South Dakota could do more to make sure day care providers are prepared in the event of a natural disaster.

Save the Children gave an "unsatisfactory" rating to South Dakota and 20 other states this week in its annual Disaster Report, which rates states on emergency and evacuation policies for K-12 schools and day cares.

South Dakota met the group's minimum standards for schools but failed to meet child care standards.

All licensed or registered day cares must conduct tornado and fire drills, but state laws don't require providers to have a plan for relocating children or reconnecting them with parents later.

"The issues that cause the greatest harm to children can be if they are not relocated or if you don't have a plan for relocation," said Richard Bland, Save the Children's national director of policy and advocacy. "The greatest trauma to both parents and kids is if they aren't able to reunify."

In Sioux Falls, home-based day cares are supposed to keep an up-to-date contact list of their families, in part to help connect with families after an emergency, said LuAnn Ford, city health department director. They're asked to provide the list to the city each year when they renew their registration.

"We house contact information here," Ford said. If a home day care is evacuated, the provider "would be able to turn to our office."

South Dakota has different rules for different types of child care. A home day care provider is required to have a fire alarm on each level, and a ready-to-use fire extinguisher near the kitchen. The larger centers are inspected annually for fire and safety hazards.

Both must conduct and document at least one tornado drill and four fire drills each year. All licensed or registered day cares must have a written evacuation plan, and staffers at the larger centers "must be aware of exits and methods to be used in the event of flood, fire, strong winds or other emergencies," according to state law.

What's missing, according to Save the Children, are rules on how day cares should relocate children after an evacuation, reconnect displaced children with their parents or evacuate children with special needs. Those are details the advocacy group would like to see states embrace.

Drills and a general emergency response plans don't anticipate the difficulties children might face after a disaster, Bland said.

"Unless you require the specific provision, you're not going to practice them, and that renders children vulnerable," Bland said. "South Dakota, it's not like you guys don't get your fair share of emergencies."

Save the Children has responded and provided support to tornado-ravaged regions of Oklahoma and families suffering from the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. His group's goal is to ensure protections are in place before communities are forced to confront tragedy, Bland said.

"I would hope that South Dakota could do that before disaster strikes," Bland said. "Do you really want the worst to happen before you find out what the gaps were?"