



As President of the Virginia Alliance of Family Child Care Associations, and as a child care provider for over 24 years, I am proud to offer parents a licensed child care setting and to join with parents and other child care providers to promote the safety of children in child care.

Since 1989, the Alliance has represented, supported, and provided training services and resources to hundreds of family child care home providers throughout Virginia and others in the child care industry. Parents want safe child care. They know that learning begins at birth and the earliest years are critical to early childhood development. It's heartbreaking to read the tragic stories of children who have died in child care over the last few years and the recent deaths in the past month of two children in Lynchburg and one in Midlothian who died in unlicensed home-based child care programs. It is heartbreaking and a tragedy for everyone involved.

Virginia is one of only eight states that do not require a license until 6 unrelated children are in the home. This has led to many areas throughout the state where licensed child care is hard to find. Yet, home-based child care is an important option for parents. At times it is the only option due to the hours that are needed. Licensing matters and helps to ensure that there are some basic safety checks in place and parents should be clear about the differences between licensed and unlicensed care.

Licensed providers are required to have a background check every 3 years. They are required to have training in health and safety and an emergency plan for when the unexpected (like a fire or natural disaster) may happen. Licensed providers are required to put infants to sleep on their backs (as recommended by the National Academy of Pediatrics) and never leave a child unattended in a car seat (as was the case in the Midlothian fire where a toddler died). At least twice a year, licensed care is subject to state monitoring to ensure that children are not at risk of an unsafe setting or practice.

In Virginia, small family child care homes where providers care for 5 or fewer unrelated children are not required to have a background check or any training. There are no minimum protections for children and there is no state monitoring or oversight at all taking place. This includes there being no oversight making sure that only 5 children are in care. Simply put there is nothing at all in place to protect not only the children in care but also to protect or educate the individual caring for those children.

As I read through the stories about the deaths of children in child care in Virginia, my heart went out to those families. At the same time, I could not help but think that many of those deaths could have been prevented if only those settings had been licensed. Providers would have had training. They would have known best practices for child care, safe sleep positions, and been prepared for emergencies. Licensing is not paperwork. It's child protection. Providers may mean well and may love caring for children; however, licensing matches that love for children with safe practices to promote the well-being of children. As a provider and being in the field for over 24 years, my heart also goes out to the individuals who were caring for those children and with the most basic safety practices in place they would have been better prepared, safety practices in place, or with a background check perhaps not even caring for those children. It is time for some changes to be made to meet the needs of working parents in today's times. On behalf of the Alliance, I am hopeful that all home-based child care providers will join with us to call for licensing for providers who care for unrelated children out of their home. It's a profession to be proud of, and a home-based environment that offers children a comfortable, small setting. The cost of a license is modest. And, the return is a peace of mind that parents and providers can work together to promote the healthy development of children.