

House of Representatives passes bipartisan bills aimed at child care reform

- [By Luca Powell lpowell@record-eagle.com](mailto:Luca.Powell@record-eagle.com)
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TRAVERSE CITY — A package of bills intended to reform how Michigan regulates at-home day care centers cleared the state House of Representatives on Wednesday.

The package includes eight bills in total, two of which were sponsored by lawmakers from the Grand Traverse region. Among them are a range of different rule removals aimed at making life easier for day care operators. One bill will establish regional networks to help day care operators with business questions. Another would add grace periods of up to 90 for day cares to come into compliance with rules violations.

“We think we’re on the right track to making systemic changes to the system,” said Matthew Gillard, President of Michigan’s Children, a policy group that advocates on behalf of children’s educational issues. “I think there is some good progress being made with these policy bills. The regional networks for the family providers is a really positive step.”

Currently, day cares are regulated by a web of state government bodies, including the Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs (LARA), the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services.

Daycare operators have expressed frustration with those regulations, as well as with the stress and low pay typical to the industry. In the past three years, the Record-Eagle found that as many as 74 daycare centers shuttered, according to closure filings from LARA.

Legislators say those closures have exacerbated staffing shortages triggered by the pandemic.

“When I talk with people in Grand Traverse County, many approach me with a similar problem — they can’t find child care that is reliable and works with their schedules,” said State Rep. John Roth, in a press release.

Roth sponsored a bill that would amend zoning regulations for day cares, allowing them to exist in multi-use buildings.

“This is a profound issue for working families, especially as more people have returned to an office setting over the last few months,” Roth said.

The most contentious of the bills is one proposed by State Rep. Jack O’Malley, titled HB 5041. O’Malley’s bill would raise the ratio of children that can be monitored by an at-home operator by one. If enacted, his bill would allow seven children to be supervised by a single day care operator.

O'Malley said he had to fight tooth and nail to get the ratio change passed in the house. His bill faced pushback from early childhood advocates who argue that adding more children to a day care would amplify burnout, as well as fail to solve systemic problems with the business model of running a daycare center.

In a press release, Gilda Jacobs, President of the Michigan League for Public Policy, said her organization had "serious reservations about HR 5041."

"We appreciate the negotiations that placed some limits around the ability of home providers to take on additional children, but we would like to see a sunset placed on HB 5041 so the impact of the ratio change could be reassessed," the press release states.

Local daycare operators share Jacobs' concern. Karin Cooney is the executive director of Angel Care, a 44-child daycare in downtown Traverse City. Cooney was receptive to the idea of peeling back LARA regulations, but warned about expanding ratios.

"If you're not providing a quality program you're basically warehousing kids and that's actually detrimental," Cooney said.

O'Malley believes expanded ratios can help keep smaller day cares afloat. And he says that other states that expanded their childcare ratios have maintained educational outcomes without negative learning consequences.

"The addition of one more kid isn't going to throw the thing into turmoil," O'Malley said.

Gillard described O'Malley's ratio bill as a "Band-Aid on a hemorrhaging wound."

"Just increasing the ratio is not a long-term solution to the problem," Gillard said. "Until we solve the workforce issue, we're not going to solve the childcare issue.

"When people are leaving the profession of child care because they can make more money at Target, that's fundamentally a problem," Gillard said. "We're not going to retain the providers we need until we solve that."