

Close-up

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Is OC approaching a day-care crisis?

As demand for facilities rises, so do complaints

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An Irvine man who runs a day-care home is accused of sexually abusing children. So is a day-care home operator in Brea.

An Anaheim woman is being investigated in the death of a toddler she was paid to care for in her home. Meanwhile, she has been charged with molesting her own children.

While extreme, these cases illustrate a serious threat to the 47,000 preschoolers in Orange County who need day care.

With birth rates climbing and an increasing number of mothers going to work, that need is greater than ever. The heightened demand, coupled with an overtaxed regulatory system, means that day-care facilities are poorly regulated, often mediocre and occasionally dangerous.

The county sorely lacks the day-care services its working parents need. There are no spaces for at least 80 percent of the county's infants and 20 percent of its 2- to 5-year-olds who need someplace to go while their parents work, according to figures from the Orange County Commission on the Status of Women.

In response to that demand, applications to run day-care facilities have flooded government offices. So far this year, those offices have granted 187 licenses, more than triple the number of licenses for all of 1983.



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But the torrent of applications nearly has drowned beleaguered inspectors. Almost anyone can obtain a license to provide day care, and once in operation, facilities are infrequently inspected.

Even when violations are found, regulatory agencies have little power to bring sanctions or close a place down.

The number of complaints against day-care facilities for the first half of 1984 was more than double the figure for the same period in 1983. Inspectors are struggling to keep up with the load.

And more than 19,000 of the county's preschool children may spend their days in unlicensed and possibly unsafe settings or be left home alone, the commission reports.

Meanwhile, the number of preschoolers in the county is

increasing 5 percent a year as the number of two-career families also goes up. The result is that day care in Orange County seems headed toward a crisis.

"There is a huge gap between what people need and what they are able to get," said Wendy Garen, day-care program manager of the Children's Home Society of California, a resource and referral agency for parents seeking day-care facilities.

"So there's going to continue to be turmoil; kids are going to die," she said.

At its best, day care is a lifesaver for working parents and a fun, stimulating experience for young children who may otherwise spend their days vegetating in front of a television.

Those involved with regulating the day-care industry say Orange County's overall quality is up to the mark.

"I think it's pretty good from what I'm aware of," said Glenn Gibbons, licensing supervisor for the county Department of Social Services, which oversees 75 percent of the county's day-care facilities.

"Maybe there's a lot of things I'm not aware of," Gibbons said, "but by and large, I think we have good providers who are motivated to provide quality day care."

But those who see some of the problems that arise in day-care facilities disagree.

Half of the available day-care facilities in Orange County are substandard, exposing children to