

Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee

To: The Honorable Senators of the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee
From: William J. Grant, Chief Executive Officer, Hildebrandt Learning Centers, LLC
Date: March 13, 2013
Subject: Child Care Center Safety Issues

Child care safety issues parallel many of the same concerns that our public and private Kindergarten through 12th grade schools are facing since the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School. However the programs and philosophy of a child care center, ages of the enrolled children, state licensing requirements, facility constraints, and operational costs pose additional challenges for our industry.

Programs and Philosophy - There is a broad range of programs and delivery philosophies that are employed in the child care field. Some emphasize promoting nature thus the desire to spend time exploring our environments both in and outdoors. Others interact with their surrounding communities placing children and staff in public areas. Whichever path a program desires to develop, the ability to meet the criteria established by the Pennsylvania Keystone STARS Quality Initiative Program and/or the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the children and the staff will not be fostered without some contact with their surrounding environments.

Ages of the Children Enrolled - Child care centers offer programs to families, in some cases, from 6 weeks of age through preschool and beyond with before/after school age programs. The ability to move children to safe areas within a center or exiting facility quickly is a daunting challenge. Infants need to be transported in evacuation cribs or carriers, toddlers may have limited ambulatory skills, and preschool children, although practicing fire drills monthly, have issues navigating during an evacuation.

Licensing Requirements -The Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare has developed licensing requirements for child care centers around the concept of keeping our children in safe environments and protecting one of our most vulnerable groups of Pennsylvanians. Certain requirements, such as mandating that children spend time outdoors (weather permitting), may put some children at risk. Inadequate playground fencing, walking excursions, and limited supervision during outdoor time may place children and staff at risk.

Child Care Facilities - A large percentage of child care facilities in Pennsylvania were not designed from the ground up as child care centers. Many are housed in existing spaces which were renovated to meet the requirements for state licensing. Necessary safety requirements typically would not have been considered in the design of these buildings. Costs to bring a facility to a higher level of safety may be beyond a center's financial ability. Safety enhancements may include the installation of entrance security systems, panic/warning systems, playground fencing and the cost for child care staff safety training.

Costs - The cost of moving all child care centers in Pennsylvania to higher level of safety/security may be out of reach for most child care center operators. Center owners and managers are caught in a "Catch 22" with the dilemma of attempting to provide a high quality program to families with only limited funds from their families'

tutions. Attracting qualified staff to deliver a quality program, payroll taxes, employee benefits, insurance, facility and food costs will use up an overwhelming portion of each tuition dollar paid by a family.

How do we move forward and how has Hildebrandt Learning Centers attempted to address this pressing issue?

Funding is always a concern when addressing many of the issues related to child care center safety as capital must be ascertained to make enhancements. Other methods to enhance safety and security will be centered on the training of staff and how they handle issues that may arise at their center. I do not purport that I or my organization have all the answers related to the issue of center safety and security but I would like to share a few of the steps we have taken over the years.

All Hildebrandt centers have door access systems that only allow families and authorized individuals to enter the facilities. Various means of access include issued swipe cards, numbered key pad entry, access fobs, etc. These access systems are the first “fire wall” for a center, but they are not perfect. We need to continually remind our families not to allow a “Tailgater” to enter the center. A “Tailgater” is a person who follows the family into the center but does not log in through the system. When entering the center, parents and guardians need to be vigilant. Families also need to be cognizant of the fact that these security methods need to be protected similar to the keys to their home or access to a credit card.

Staff are specifically trained not to allow entrance to an individual who does not have approved access or proper identification. In some instances, families will designate alternates to pick up or drop off their child. Strict policies have been established related to these persons.

Playground gates are to be locked at all times. Playground design should allow the children to exit the center directly into the fenced playground. Fencing material specifications at most of our centers require 6 foot heights and may not allow visual access.

At a few of our centers, a posted security guard is on-site at all times. At all federal child care centers operated by Hildebrandt, security is in place in or near the lobbies adjacent to the centers’ entrances.

We are encouraging our sponsors to upgrade security in their facilities. For example, one of our college sponsors installed a panic/alarm system that, when activated, will signal an alert to the college’s security department and is also tied into the police department. Further enhancements at the college included installing locks on each individual classroom door to allow for specific area lock downs.

Hildebrandt Learning Centers has established other methods of notification and/or alerts. However, since we wish to keep those notification processes within the circle of staff, families and administration, I am sure you will respect my hesitation to discuss those areas in detail.

Company Profile

Hildebrandt Learning Centers, LLC is a leader in developing and managing employer/organization-related early learning centers in Pennsylvania, and the middle-Atlantic region of the United States for over 20 years. Presently, Hildebrandt operates 44 employer/organization-sponsored early learning centers and 2 adult day services centers

and is a pioneer in the intergenerational concept of caring for both young and elderly in the same setting. Centers include Penn State University, Rodale, Inc., West Virginia University and Masonic Villages.

In addition to being a leading management company of on-site, employer/organization-related centers, Hildebrandt Learning Centers is committed as an organization to provide children and their families with the finest in early childhood education programs. This commitment is supported by our efforts to achieve National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation for our centers. Currently, 30 Hildebrandt centers are accredited by NAEYC with a number of centers awaiting their accreditation review.

Accreditation by NAEYC denotes a program demonstrating a commitment to providing high quality care, far exceeding state licensing standards, for young children and their families. In the United States, approximately 7% of all licensed centers have the distinction of accreditation by NAEYC. In addition, 29 Hildebrandt centers have been designated as Keystone STAR Four centers by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, their highest distinction. In February 2013, Hildebrandt Learning Centers was listed as the 4th largest employer child care management organization in the United States by Exchange magazine.

You can learn more about Hildebrandt Learning Centers at: www.hildebrandtlearningcenters.com

