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Though Liberal has 40 licensed day care facilities, the demand is growing due to lack of providers who can meet and maintain state regulations. Courtesy photo

By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first in a series of articles dealing with the growing day care problem in Liberal. Future stories will address licensing for day care centers and other issues.

As of May 14, Seward County had 40 licensed day care facilities in operation.

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That number does include the facility operated by First Baptist Church, which announced it would be closing its doors later this year.

In April, the Liberal Area Coalition for Families hosted a public meeting to start addressing the need for more day cares in Liberal, and since then, some interest has been seen from the public in growing the number of facilities.

While the number of licensed day cares is known, Wanda Covert, day care surveyor with the Seward County Health Department, said finding an exact number of facilities in the county is a difficult task.

"Each provider is licensed for 10 kids, so it all depends on how many kids you have," she said.

Covert said the numbers likewise depend on the age range of the children in the facility. She also explained that having infants in a day care skews the figures.

"According to the regulations, this person would be licensed for one provider, 10 kids," she said. "That's if you have zero infants. It'd be 10 kids. If you have one infant, you can only have so

much of this age group.”

Covert said an exact estimate of facilities is also hard because the number of kids each day care has is not known. She added SCHED uses Child Care Connection of Garden City, which has a contract with the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, as a resource and referral agency.

Covert said providers are not mandated to register with KDHE because of an attached fee, but if the providers are registered, this will give a number as to how many children use the facility and what age groups are involved.

“If a parent calls me and says ‘I need a day care,’ I refer them to that number,” she said, referring to CCC. “They can go ahead and give them a list of day cares in the county and what age groups they carry and how many kids they’re open for. They have to let them know every month how many kids they have or how many openings they have available.”

Covert said since the April LAFC meeting, one day care has closed in Liberal and has relocated to nearby Sublette. She said although First Baptist had announced its closing, she has not received official notification.

“I hear what the community has told me,” she said. “In writing, they have nothing. Everybody is required if they’re going to close to send me a notification of a closure to give me a date of approximation. I’ve gotten nothing to KDHE or to me.”

Covert said she will do initial work on a center on Monday licensed for 24 children, and one or two other facilities have closed for the summer. She said applications for day cares ask when the center will be opened with three options, all year, school year or during the summer.

“I do have one that is only open during the school year because they have a lot of teachers’ kids,” she said.

Covert said for now, there is not a definite number for how many day cares are in operation in Seward County, nor for how many children use those facilities.

“I have one particular one that’s licensed for 10, but when I go look at her paperwork, I review everything,” she said. “She’s got 24 registered, but the thing is she has some in the morning. She has some in the afternoon. They have some that come only in the afternoon after school. She can have as many as she wants to registered as long as no more than those 10 at any particular time.”

Covert said anyone who does register as a provider in Seward County must see her before doing so, and she said she has had a few inquiries since the LAFC meeting.

“I have a list of people that have come in and asked for information,” she said.

Covert said before a day care is opened, providers must get an orientation, and one of the

things the surveyor asks about is the level of education of the provider.

“Do you have a high school diploma or a GED?” she said. “If they say no, they have to get that first. That’s one of the new regulations. Feb. 3, 2012, the new Lexi’s law came in, and that’s one of the requirements. You have to have a high school diploma or a GED. That’s what holds back a lot of people.”

Covert said orientations can take up to three hours depending on the questions providers have for her.

“I do that, and I sometimes do it in their homes as part of the technical assistance. I do it here in my office,” she said.

Covert also examines day care regulations with potential providers.

“I give them any resources they might need like Web sites on how to get their training,” she said. “Not only do you need a high school diploma or a GED, but you need your 15 hours of additional training, which includes pediatric first aid, head trauma, child abuse, child neglect.”

Covert said providers can request that an orientation be done at their house. She said she can provide technical assistance, but she emphasized that the orientation is not an official inspection.

“It’s just to help you out, just to remind you,” she said. “Tell them that knives need to be put away. Your outlets need to be plugged, your fencing. I let them know that their fence needs to be intact. Anything that is alcohol-based needs to be put away. Anything with warning labels needs to be put away. I go over all of that with them during that technical assistance. When I go do the official inspection by appointment, they know already what to expect.”

Covert will be on hand at this weekend’s day care fair at Liberal Friends Church to provide information and set up times for orientations.

“If anybody wants to set up an appointment with me, that’s what I can do,” she said.

Covert said she prefers doing orientations for smaller groups because it is easier to know what those groups want from a facility.

“If they want day care, I’ll do just day care,” she said. “If they want a center, I’ll just do center. When they’re all bundled up like on Saturday, I’m not sure, and I don’t want to confuse them.”

The Daycare Fair will open at 10 a.m. Saturday and run through noon at Liberal Friends Church, 1650 N. Western Ave. The come-and-go event is free and offers light brunch refreshments. For more information, contact the Liberal Area Coalition for Families at 655-7177.

WANTED: More day care facilities

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