



Testimony Re: S-2174 Relating to Health and Safety – Licensing of Summer Camps
Senate Health & Human Services Committee
February 15, 2024
Leanne Barrett, Senior Policy Analyst

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports passage of S-2174, which would require the Department of Human Services to establish regulations to license summer camps for children and to conduct annual inspections of the camps.

Summer camps and summer enrichment programs are widely used services in Rhode Island, particularly for children of working parents. In Rhode Island, 77% of children ages six to 17 have all parents in the workforce and many need a safe, high-quality learning environment during the hours, days, and weeks when their parents are at work and school is not in session.

Currently, licensing and staffing requirements for summer camps are not clearly defined in Rhode Island statute, and the state does not publish a list of licensed summer camps. **“Recreation camps” are specifically exempt from licensing under the Rhode Island child care licensing statute 42-12.5-4, even though many families in Rhode Island use camps as a form of child care, for 8-10+ hours a day all summer long.** The child care licensing law does not define “recreation camp.”

Rhode Island state law also **exempts “organized camps that operate for seven months or less per year” from the state’s minimum wage law.**

At a minimum, we recommend that the statute be updated so that summer camps that accept payments from the Child Care Assistance Program be required to have a license. And we recommend that the minimum wage exemption for summer camp staff be repealed.

Under federal rules, **child care funds can only be used to pay tuition to programs that conduct comprehensive staff background checks and ensure that staff are trained in basic health and safety standards for children.** States must establish and enforce clear health and safety standards and conduct annual, unannounced inspections of programs and post inspection reports on a searchable public website and annually report the number of children who were seriously injured, experienced child abuse or neglect, or died in a licensed facility. In 2021, there were 4 children seriously injured, 12 children who were victims of abuse or neglect, and 0 children who died in a licensed child care program in Rhode Island.

Having a clear system for licensing summer day camps will help families find safe and high-quality options for their children. Licensing camps will help families who qualify for the Child Care Assistance Program to use the subsidy to help pay for the cost of camp.

Licensing camps will help the state communicate with and support summer camp programs by offering information about trainings, funding opportunities, and providing resources to help during emergencies.

We make the following recommendations for consideration:

- **Clearly specify the ages of children that can be enrolled in summer camps and specify the regulations apply to programs that serve children from ages 6 through 12.** Require that any summer programs that serve children under age 6 be licensed under the existing child care center regulations. Any summer program that ONLY serves children 13 and over could be exempt from licensing.
- **Start first by requiring a summer camp license for summer programs that would like to accept payments from the RI Child Care Assistance Program for children ages 6 through 12** (and that do not have a “child care center” license that includes school-age children or want to serve more children during the summer above their licensed capacity during the school year).
- **Offer voluntary summer camp licenses for programs** even if they are not required to be licensed. Phase in summer camp licensing by requiring it for programs that accept state or local funding and/or for programs that would like to be listed on a state managed website.
- **Ensure DHS has sufficient staffing, data systems, and resources to successfully license and monitor the health and safety of camps.** Currently, Rhode Island does not have a strong data system to keep track of licensed child care programs or data collected during inspections. Rhode Island is working to comply with the 2014 federal law that requires states to post at least three years of inspection reports for child care programs on a searchable website.
- **Establish clear staffing requirements for camps including the staff: child ratio for general activities as well as activities that could result in serious injury or death** (swimming, gymnastics, horseback riding), ratios during overnight stays, and the structure for mixed-age groups. We recommend reviewing the current child care regulations in Rhode Island, camp staffing requirements in Massachusetts and Connecticut, and the American Camp Association’s accreditation standards.
- **Clearly define the minimum staff qualifications for camp staff,** including the minimum age of staff, whether a high school diploma is required, and the pre-service and annual training requirements.
- **Require that the results of summer camp inspections be posted on a public website** along with information about serious injuries, deaths, and substantiated maltreatment of children in licensed summer camps.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for the work you do to ensure that children have safe and enriching places to learn both in and out of school.