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When First Baptist Church closes its day care service this summer, up to 80 children and their parents will be looking for somewhere else to go. The county is interested in helping any individuals or companies get started in opening a day care facility. Courtesy photo

By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times With the recent announcement of the closing of the day care at Liberal's First Baptist Church, many parents around town were left looking for a place to take their kids. The Liberal Area Coalition For Families recently hosted a meeting to address those problems, and Seward County Commission Chairman Ada Linenbroker, who attended the meeting, discussed some of what she found out during last week's joint meeting of that board, the Liberal City Commission and the USD No. 480 Board of Education.

Linenbroker said she and other community leaders were confronted with parents who were upset and worried about the status' of Liberal's day care industry.

"Since First Baptist is going to close their day care, there's about 80 kids going there," she said. "Parents are wanting to know where they're going to take their kids."

Local day cares are inspected by the Seward County Health Department. Many facilities, including First Baptist's, have closed due in large part to licensing requirements, and Linenbroker said SCHD is going to continue to work hard to get more facilities in Liberal.

"We're not going to be able to rush the process because this is a state thing," she said. "You've got to go through all the inspections and all the work. That goes through the state. They're the ones that do the final approval, not us. We're going to try to be proactive in trying to help people."

County administrator April Warden then gave a talk on some the information presented at the LACF meeting. She said one of the ideas suggested by coalition director Sarah M. Foreman was to have a “day care fair day.”

Warden said this is a great idea, and SCHD Child Care Surveyor Wanda Covert would need to be a part of that.

“She is the one that would need to bring that paperwork to that meeting to be able to provide an orientation and the information they would need to start the process to open a day care,” Warden said.

The administrator added Covert is willing be a part of the process, and her participation would clear up some of the issues concerning what it takes to open a day care.

“It’s just a matter of people not understanding the steps that you have to follow to do something like this,” Warden said.

In an e-mail following the coalition meeting, Foreman said the day care fair day would be an “opportunity for persons interested in day care to get all the needed information and to figure out the next steps.”

“This issue came up often, and I feel that some people are overwhelmed with the process,” she said. “This would help alleviate one of the barriers and have all the needed information in one place.”

Foreman said the fair would likely to take place on a Saturday morning in June.

Warden said following the LACF meeting, many people phoned the county who were interested in opening a day care.

“They are under the impression that the school and the city and the county have decision makers that can make these decisions and make this stuff happen,” she said.

Warden said Covert herself received six inquiries, including some before the coalition meeting and also from some local churches.

“She’s had about three other personal inquiries on home day cares,” Warden said. “She is working with those people.”

Warden said the process of opening a day care is not a quick one, however, as certification could take anywhere from 60 to 90 days. She then gave a run down of the types of facilities Seward County has and how many children those day cares can provide service to, starting with group homes.

“Group homes which are licensed for 12 children and have at least two adults working in them,

there are two in Kismet and seven in Liberal for a total of nine,” she said. “They’re capable of serving 108 children overall. For any of those people that keep infants, infants take more care than older children. If there’s any infants in the home, they don’t allow you to take as many children.”

Warden said the infant numbers do include the provider’s own children. She then talked about the 27 license day care homes in Seward County, all of which are in Liberal.

“These are only ones that she knows about that are certified day cares,” she said. “They’re capable of serving 270 children.”

Seward County currently has one child care center, Head Start, for ages 3 to 5.

“They have four classrooms, and they can serve up to 17 students per classroom, so they’re licensed for 68,” Warden said.

Rainbow Room is the county’s only current preschool, and Warden said that facility offers four different units.

“What that means is they’re open Monday through Friday,” she said. “They have some students that go on a Monday/Wednesday and another group that go on Friday. That’s where they come up with four units. It’s different days that those kids rotate.”

Warden said Rainbow Room is capable of serving 96 children, but as of right now, only 78 preschoolers use that facility.

The last category Warden talked about was afterschool programs, of which there is only one in the county, that being Liberal Latchkey.

“They’re licensed for 46 school age children,” she said. “Right now, they are down because there are school programs offered through USD 480.”

May 9 was the last day for those particular programs, though, according to Warden.

Warden said there is obviously a day care problem in the community, but she added local entities for the most part are not involved in fixing the issue.

“The county is involved a little bit because we do have the inspector that works out of our health department,” she said.

Warden said local leaders would like to educate the public on what it takes to open a day care.

“I don’t think they really understand,” she said. “It’s just the public not being educated on how things work completely. Hopefully, we can help them through this.”

Linenbroker expressed the urgent need for more day care in Liberal.

“A lot of parents are really upset, and if we don’t get some more day cares in the area, we’re going to have a lot of people who won’t be able to go to school if they don’t have any place to take their kids,” she said.

County commissioner Doug Lafreniere said local leaders are on the right track to fixing the day care issue, but he said it is not the responsibility of the three entities at the joint meeting to tackle the problem.

“Day care is a huge responsibility,” he said. “I don’t think it’s a road we can really afford to go down. I think the right path is use some of the organizations and people that are interested. Try to assist them to get their license and stay on the path.”

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