

KY health officials tell lawmakers abuse and neglect getting worse in child care

BY JOHN CHEVES
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FRANKFORT
Violations of health and safety standards in Kentucky child care centers are growing worse, state health officials acknowledged Wednesday in testimony to a legislative committee.

The hearing followed a Herald-Leader report in June that found that Kentucky has, without public discussion, seen a steady climb in substantiated reports of abuse and neglect in its child care centers since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Problems identified by the newspaper included inadequate daycare staffing and injuries to children such as broken bones, burns, bruises and cuts. State health officials who declined to be interviewed by the newspaper in June were instructed to appear before the Interim Joint Committee on Families and Children on Wednesday. The Kentucky Division of Regulated Child Care has launched a pilot project to provide child care centers with training and close monitoring when they face a violation that could lead to serious consequences if not quickly



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Andrea Day, center, speaks while Melissa Moore, right and Tricia Steward sit by her during an oversight hearing on Wednesday, July 30, 2025, at the Capitol Annex in Frankfort, Ky.

fixed, Melissa Moore, the agency’s director, told lawmakers. So far this year, five child care centers have volunteered to participate in the project, Moore said. ‘A perfect storm’: Abuse, neglect increasing in Kentucky child care centers According to data Moore presented to the committee, her office is on track to issue about 380 civil penalties for violations to Kentucky child care centers by the end of 2025, resulting in \$263,628 in fines collected so far this year. That’s up from from 360 civil penalties issued in 2024 and 290 in 2023.

The majority of those penalties are for Type A violations, which include violations that cause harm or imminent threat of harm or danger to a child, or failure to perform the necessary background checks on employees, Moore said. The numbers of daycare license revocations, denials of new licenses, emergency license suspensions — all are higher so far in 2025 compared to the last couple of years, Moore added. No member of the committee asked Moore or her colleagues why the health and safety problems are getting markedly worse at Kentucky child care cen-

ters, but one lawmaker said he has a theory. The committee’s co-chairman, Sen. Danny Carroll, R-Paducah, said in his past experience helping to run a daycare through the Easter Seals West Kentucky, the behavior of young children in child care has become much worse since the pandemic. His daycare had to institute a “two strikes” policy to remove children whose repeated bad behavior disrupted the center for everyone else, Carroll said. “When you get put in a situation, when you’ve got kids with major behavioral issues, from time to time, staff are gonna react improperly,” Carroll said. “I felt sorry for those folks, the things that they had to put up with, getting punched, getting hit, getting spit on, getting cussed at, and that was a daily thing for some of our classes — and staff after staff leaving,” Carroll said. “And I know this is common throughout the entire state. Providers have told me that. So I think we need to look at this a little bit closer.” Kids hurt, bullied, forgotten: Incidents from KY child care center investigations Carroll said he might file a bill in the 2026 Gen-

eral Assembly that could shield a child care center from regulatory liability if the offender is an employee who violated facility policy and the facility responded in good faith. It’s not fair for the state to close child care centers for incidents the daycares could not have prevented, he said. “When I see the staff there from day to day, (asking) ‘Are we going to have a job tomorrow?’ When I see parents that walk by, (asking) ‘Are you all going to be open tomorrow?’ When I see a five-star center get hammered by the media for something that we as a center couldn’t control,” Carroll told Moore. “And I know that our center was not the only one that went through that. That troubles me.” Moore told Carroll she agreed that Kentucky child care providers are facing additional stress because of poor behavior by some children. “It is a grave concern for us,” Moore said. “It is the reason why we created the targeted technical support option, because we are seeing an increase in the behavior for children and realize that providers can use additional assistance.” After the hearing,

Moore and Inspector General Tricia Steward declined to discuss the problem of abuse and neglect in child care centers with the Herald-Leader. In its June reporting, the Herald-Leader found that at least 11 Kentucky daycare employees who were identified in abuse and neglect cases during the first eight months of 2024 ended up charged by police, usually with misdemeanor assault. Such charges could bring up to a year in jail. But court records show these cases either tended to be dismissed — and in one case, quickly expunged from public view in court records — or disposed of with two years probation, not jail time, provided the defendants commit no further offenses during that period. Industry experts told the Herald-Leader that one big problem is inadequate staffing, not just in numbers but in quality. One-third of the daycare industry’s workforce in Kentucky disappeared between 2019 and 2024, discouraged by an average hourly wage of only \$13.98, scant benefits and stressful job duties. In some of the 2024 incident reports reviewed by the newspaper, staff accused of abusing or neglecting children were barely out of high school and had only a few months of relevant job experience. John Cheves, jcheves@herald-leader.com

Where have measles cases been reported in KY? Track the highly contagious virus

BY AARON MUDD
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An outbreak of the highly contagious measles virus has reached 14 total cases across Kentucky, with the latest case reported in Louisville this week, according to media reports. That case makes for a total of two reported in Louisville. They aren’t connected to a larger measles outbreak in Fayette and Woodford counties, WDRB in Louisville reported Tuesday. There are nine total measles cases in the Central Kentucky outbreak, the last of which was identified July 8, according to a Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services tracker, last updated July 28. Of those nine cases, six are in Fayette County and three in Woodford County. As of July 30, no new measles cases have been reported in Fayette County, Dr. Steve Davis of the Lexington-Fayette County Health Department confirmed. The individuals are household contacts and have been quarantining since the initial case.

Measles is a highly contagious virus that infects up to 90% of unprotected individuals if they are exposed. The virus spreads through respiratory droplets that can remain in the air for up to two hours. It is especially dangerous for pregnant women and young, unvaccinated children, possibly leading to brain swelling, pneumonia, death and other serious complications. Symptoms include a high fever, cough, runny nose, red and watery eyes and a red, blotchy rash that usually begins on the face and behind the ears, according to the Mayo Clinic. Tiny white spots inside the mouth, called Koplik spots, are another telltale sign of measles. Given how fast measles spreads, anyone who suspects they may have it should contact their local health department and health care provider.

WHERE HAVE MEASLES CASES BEEN REPORTED IN KENTUCKY IN 2025?

Kentucky’s first confirmed case of measles in 2025 came in February and was documented in a Franklin County adult who traveled abroad. The second case occurred in March in a child who does not live in the U.S. The child was traveling through the state to seek treatment. They were diagnosed at a Kentucky health care facility, making it a Kentucky case, according to the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services. A separate measles case unrelated to the Fayette/Woodford outbreak was also confirmed in Todd County June 27. According to the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services, cases by county of residence are as follows, current as of July 28, 2025:

- Fayette County: 6
- Franklin County: 1
- Jefferson County: 2
- Todd County: 1
- Woodford County: 3
- International resident diagnosed in Kentucky: 1

Of the 14 Kentucky measles cases, 13 were either unvaccinated or those with unknown vaccination status. The remaining case had only one dose of the MMR vaccine. Two doses of the vaccine is the standard recommendation, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Measles can be very serious, but it is avoidable through vaccination. We urge all parents to have their children vaccinated to ensure they are protected from preventable diseases like measles,” Kentucky Health and Family Services Secretary Dr. Steven Stack previously said of the outbreak. Do you have a question about health in Kentucky for our service journalism team? We’d like to hear from you. Fill out our Know Your Kentucky form or email ask@herald-leader.com. Aaron Mudd, amudd@herald-leader.com



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The Fayette County Public Schools Budget Solutions Work Group holds its first meeting at the Hill in Lexington, Ky., on Wednesday, June 25, 2025.

UK, Keeneland, business leaders urge Fayette Schools: Don’t raise taxes

BY VALARIE HONEYCUTT SPEARS
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Fayette County Public Schools got a stern message from local business leaders and University of Kentucky officials Wednesday: You cannot tax your way out of a financial crisis. Leaders across the city are encouraging school board members to close a \$16 million deficit without increasing the Occupational License Tax. The recommendation to raise the tax, which created controversy earlier this summer, was one of 10 budget-crunch solutions the district’s budget work group proposed Tuesday night. It was the lowest recommendation on the list. “We can’t tax our way out of this process. The reality is that the budget is structurally imbalanced,” representatives from UK and Commerce Lexington wrote in an op-ed column to the Herald-Leader Wednesday morning. “Bringing balance to the revenues and expenses is the only way to achieve long-term stability and sustainability.” The column was signed by Jay Blanton and Eric

Monday, representing the University of Kentucky, and Commerce Lexington members, including its board chair, Carla Blanton. Commerce Lexington representatives on the FCPS budget working group included Hunter Stout of Keeneland, Stephen Behnke of Lexington Clinic and Rob Shear of the company SRC. “By working together with the district and engaged community representatives, Commerce Lexington believes that a short-term solution for the next budget is achievable while maintaining the Occupational License Tax at its current amount,” the group said in a Wednesday news release. “Reducing the contingency fund, while still keeping it at the legally required amount, will resolve the deficit and provide an additional cushion. In addition, cost-saving measures should be implemented,” the statement said. District officials did not respond to questions Wednesday. On Tuesday night, district leaders shared a gloomy forecast for the district if a new revenue stream to bridge the deficit is not funded.

On that list: Painful staff cuts, reductions in student services, larger class sizes, fewer programs for struggling readers, more long-term substitute teachers and deferred building maintenance, among other items. Deputy Superintendent Houston Barber told community leaders Tuesday: “We cannot sustain competitive salaries, absorb inflation, or deliver the education our students deserve without new revenue.” Fayette County Schools has about \$42 million in its budget contingency fund, about 6 percent of its budget. The top recommendation of the work group was to reduce the amount in the contingency fund to address the budget shortfall. To address the gap in the \$848 million budget for fiscal year 2026, which began July 1, the school board earlier this year voted to increase the local Occupational License Tax from 0.5% to 0.75% on people who live and work in Fayette County – generating over \$30 million annually. However, after Kentucky Attorney General Russell Coleman said in an opinion that the proper notice was not given and

a public hearing was not held, FCPS leaders paused the implementation of the tax proposal and formed the budget solutions working group. Its mission: Review the budget, explore cost savings and recommend solutions. The Fayette school board is to revisit the budget issue on Aug. 18. District leaders told the work group Tuesday night that without new revenue, the school district faces drastic cuts. They have previously said the district needs the additional revenue from the proposed tax increase. The Commerce Lexington statement said a thriving workforce and community require a strong public school system. “We want to ensure that Fayette County students and educators have the resources they need for continued success,” the statement said. In the past four years, FCPS students are recovering learning loss in reading at three times the national average and outpacing the national average in math recovery, graduation rates are steadily increasing, the number of students taking at least one college-level class has nearly tripled, and FCPS produces 32 percent of the state’s highest-performing students with 6.5 percent of Kentucky’s total student enrollment, the Commerce Lexington statement said. Commerce Lexington officials remain committed to working with FCPS to find balance in the budget through additional cost savings and efficiencies. “On behalf of our 1,800 members who represent a substantial number of employees in Fayette County, we believe our community can solve this challenge in a way that maintains high standards for our students while not adding to the cost burdens of working families or creating barriers to economic development and job recruitment,” the Commerce Lexington statement said. This is a developing story and will be updated. Valarie Honeycutt Spears, vhoneycutt@herald-leader.com