Ask ECRI | On-Site Childcare for Employees during COVID-19 Pandemic

As the COVID-19 pandemic forces closure of schools and nonessential businesses throughout the country, several aging services risk managers have reached out to ECRI, seeking guidance on establishing temporary on-site childcare for their employees. These employees may be otherwise unable to report to work because their children’s schools and daycare centers have closed, leaving them without reliable childcare. Given the scope of the pandemic, organizations cannot afford to be short-staffed and are considering offering on-site childcare to help ensure that staff can still report for work.

In our response, ECRI notes that the guidance we offer for consideration is not legal advice, and should be viewed as risk management advice only. Organizations should work with their legal counsel regarding state-specific requirements. In addition, if organizations are considering partnering with third parties (e.g., local churches who may provide volunteer childcare), they should ensure they understand those third parties’ insurance coverages and requirements.

The organization should designate an individual who is responsible for program oversight, and that person should consider the following issues in establishing an emergency program.

Staffing

States have varying requirements for background checks and clearances for childcare workers. The organization should ascertain whether the staff or volunteers who will provide childcare have those clearances or can obtain them quickly; most states allow online applications. States may temporarily waive or relax requirements during a declared emergency. The organization’s legal counsel should identify whether any such waivers have been issued.

Identifying individuals available to provide childcare may prove challenging. With schools closed, organizations may be able to reach out to college students who are also home from school unexpectedly, particularly those studying early childhood or K-12 education. Likewise, elementary or high school teachers who are not able to teach online may be available. Some organizations may even consider high school students to supplement childcare staffing; ECRI recommends that the organization consider ensuring there is a sufficient number of adults (over age 21) present in the childcare areas when these younger individuals are supervising young children.

Staffing should be sufficient to allow individual caregivers to take breaks. Supervising children is tiring under the best of circumstances; during an emergency, staff will have their own stresses and concerns to handle. Allowing breaks can help ensure that all staff are performing as optimally as possible. The state likely will have established expected caregiver-to-child staffing ratios that the organization must meet.

Backup staffing is also important, particularly if childcare staff become sick or are otherwise unable to report for work. The organization’s nursing and other staff may come to depend on the childcare to be able to perform their duties; if the on-site childcare is unexpectedly unavailable due to staffing concerns, it could have a ripple effect on the organization’s remaining staff.
Security
The organization should clearly define who has access to the areas the children will occupy, and establish a sign-in/sign-out procedure for drop-off and pick-up. For example, schools, daycare centers, and other similar providers do not let the children leave with just anyone. Rather, they know who is approved to pick up the children and typically will not allow children to leave with adults who are not on an approved list. The childcare area should be secure in order to limit access and allow caregivers to enforce sign-in, sign-out, and dismissal procedures.

Enrollment and Daily Operations
The organization should clearly define the ages of children who are eligible to attend, the hours of operation, and whether parents will be required to provide any equipment or supplies (e.g., diapers, sleeping bags).

During the enrollment process in the on-site childcare program, the organization should obtain information about each child’s medical needs that may need to be addressed during the day, including food or other allergies, routine or ad hoc medications, and behavioral needs. If the child will require medication, the organization should understand how it will be stored and administered and whether it can meet these requirements.

For each child, childcare providers should have readily accessible records regarding whom to contact if the child experiences a medical emergency. Likewise, policies should give caregivers clear direction on whether to dial 911 or take some other action in response to an emergency.

Children will likely be on-site long enough that their meals and snacks must be accounted for. Organizations should define whether they will provide food or whether it will be provided by the children’s parents or guardians. If the organization provides food, it should establish a process for communicating the menu to parents who may need to furnish alternatives in case of allergies or sensitivities.

Environmental Safety
The space occupied by the children should be large enough to allow room for indoor activities as well as quiet time, with adequate toilet facilities for both the children and staff. In addition, the space occupied by the children should not include any areas considered unsafe for the children (e.g., storage rooms, mechanical rooms, cabinets, cleaning supplies, chemicals). If such areas cannot be avoided, they should be sufficiently secured against unintended access and monitored regularly by childcare staff.

Childcare areas may require additional or a different type of cleaning than typical care areas or common areas. This is particularly true during a pandemic. This cleaning should be scheduled so that it becomes routine and is not overlooked.

Finally, consider technology or additional infrastructure that may be required in the childcare area. For instance, will land-line phones be installed, or will childcare providers be expected to use their personal cell phones (e.g., in case of a medical emergency)? Is adequate Wi-Fi bandwidth available if tablets, computers, or other connected devices will be used for activities, or to allow school-age children to do classwork? Given its emergency setup, the organization’s childcare program will not likely be expected to provide the same level of daily activity and programming that an established childcare center would; however, the organization should consider requirements for keeping the children occupied and engaged for extended periods.

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The recommendations contained in Ask ECRI do not constitute legal advice. Facilities should consult legal counsel for specific guidance and develop clinical guidance in consultation with their clinical staff.

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