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¶ BC-PA--Nuclear Plants-Preschoolers, Bjt,630

¶ Federal mandate sought for preschool evacuation plans

¶ AP Photo PASC501

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¶ HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) _ On the day of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Larry Christian and his wife decided to pick up their daughter from her nursery school near the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant, just as a precaution.

¶ A week later, Christian asked the nursery school's director how it would be evacuated in the event of an emergency at the plant, the site of the nation's worst commercial nuclear accident in 1979.

¶ "There was no plan. They took an active approach in trying to implement plans, but they were getting no assistance," Christian said. "I had contacted several other agencies ... and surprisingly there were no comprehensive requirements for daycare centers and nursery schools to have evacuation plans."

¶ Christian, a resident of New Cumberland, across the Susquehanna River from Harrisburg, now hopes the federal government will intervene. Last fall, he and the leader of a nuclear watchdog group petitioned the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission to require state and local governments to include nursery schools and daycare centers within 10 miles of nuclear power plants in their emergency preparedness plans.

¶ NRC spokesman Scott Burnell said the agency is reviewing the petition and expects to issue a decision by Nov. 1.

¶ The Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency formally opposed the petition in January, in the waning days of Republican former Gov. Mark Schweiker's administration, saying preschools are private businesses and should be encouraged to develop such plans on a voluntary basis.

¶ In a follow-up letter sent to Christian in April, PEMA Director David Sanko said current federal guidelines allow private institutions to participate in evacuation plans voluntarily.

¶ "Our recommendation is based on the belief that parental and local involvement with these facilities will have better success than another highly prescriptive federal regulation," Sanko wrote.

¶ More recently, officials in Democratic Gov. Ed Rendell's administration said they were taking several steps to improve preschoolers' safety across the state.

¶ PEMA and the state Department of Public Welfare issued a joint statement Aug. 15 saying the welfare department would "immediately" seek new regulations to mandate broader, "all hazards" emergency plans for child-care centers and nursery schools. The department also would require any facilities receiving state aid to have such plans in place as a condition of receiving the aid.

¶ "It would include the possibility of a nuclear emergency, but it would also include scores of other types of emergencies that could arise," said Tom Hickey, a spokesman for the governor.

¶ Additionally, PEMA is developing "model" emergency preparedness plans to be released in the next several weeks for daycare centers and

nursery schools to use as a guide for creating their own plans, Hickey said.

¶ The Rendell administration is reviewing PEMA's opposition, but Hickey declined to say how soon officials may decide whether to change the state's position on the petition.

¶ Christian, whose younger daughter is entering preschool this year, said that, although he views those developments as "definitely a positive thing," he still believes a federal regulation is needed to make sure other states follow suit.

¶ "I think it's great that they're doing something on the state level now, but I still question why they aren't supporting the petition," he said. "This issue's bigger than just Pennsylvania."

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¶ On the Net:

¶ Nuclear Regulatory Commission: <http://www.nrc.gov>

¶ Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare:

<http://www.dpw.state.pa.us/>

¶ Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency:

<http://www.pema.state.pa.us/>

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