

State forcing Kindertown to close



Maria Barrows-Crist, right, receives one of many hugs of support Wednesday night.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

Tears were flowing and words of anger uttered as more than a 100 parents stood in the play yard at Kindertown on Wednesday night to hear owner-director Maria Barrows-Crist explain that the state plans to close the facility Oct. 15.

It means 130 children who attend the South Lake Tahoe day-care center will be displaced and the 20 employees will be without a job.

None of the parents at the 30-minute meeting said anything negative about the center. Most looked dumbstruck.

“I am sorry this slander has hit your employees too,” Ian Baker told Barrows-Crist afterward. “I think it’s all fabrication. I come here all the time and everyone is

coherent.”

Baker was referencing the state’s charges that employees have been at work under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Rebecca Westmore, administrative law judge, handed down her decision Aug. 17 in a 28-page document. However, it was just last week that Barrows-Crist found out her state license was going to be revoked. It came in the form of a condolence letter from Choices from Children about the impending closure.

The directive also says Barrows-Crist, who has run the 36-year-old facility since 1978, must not work with children for two years.

Two of the key witnesses for the state are former Kindertown employees who had been fired by Barrows-Crist.

Barrows-Crist’s attorney on Monday applied for a stay and reconsideration of the decision.

“The judge said I didn’t show remorse. Both of the girls who complained cried,” Barrows-Crist, 57, said of the May 14-15 and July 20 hearings in Sacramento.

Judge’s ruling

In Westmore’s decision she cites Kindertown giving a peanut product to a child who is allergic to substance. The judge ruled Barrows-Crist tried to “minimize the gravity of the situation.”

To the charge of removing a child without parental consent, Barrows-Crist said the child was taken to her daughter’s home – who at the time was an employee of Kindertown – because no one picked the child up, nor were they reachable and the center was closed. The judge said that showed poor judgment.

Accusations against Dee Dee Crist, the owner’s daughter, relate to her allegedly being under the influence of alcohol

or other drugs while working. The judge ruled Crist should never be permitted to work with children again.

In an incident from 2003, the judge believed Diane Brown, a licensing program analyst, over Barrows-Crist when it came to whether a child was burned by hot soup.

“I find the testimony of LPA Whitmire to be credible. Respondent Barrows-Crist’s testimony was an obvious attempt to minimize the misconduct, and reflects a continued pattern of denial related to her management and operation of the Kindertown facilities,” Judge Westmore wrote.

Lake Tahoe News can only surmise the judge got the LPA’s name wrong. LPA Whitmire is referenced in other testimony, but not this particular item.

Part of Kindertown’s license revocation includes 2.5 pages about Miss Marcia, aka Marcia Sarosik, not being fingerprinted, but teaching a class at the preschool-day care-infant center.

The fence has been 3-feet high for 30 years. Suddenly, Barrows-Crist was reprimanded for it not being 4-feet high.

The judge’s decision goes on to say Barrows-Crist retaliated against former employees. The judge sided with the former employees.

Parents react

After Barrows-Crist read a one-page letter last night to parents, many of whom had little ones with them, one after another said they’d do everything they could to keep Kindertown open. Some talked of staging a protest march in the coming days.

“You can’t find anything like this in Tahoe,” Stephanie Yuzbick said as she held one of her two daughters who attend Kindertown. “I know what she has done for this community. This

needs to stay open.”

One person shouted, “If we wanted to be somewhere else, we probably would be.”

Other parents worried it might mean needing one spouse to quit their job to be able to care for a toddler.

“I’ve noticed Ryan is ahead of kids who don’t come here,” John Cocomores said of his son who is about to turn 3.

Tiffany Reid said her 2-year-old daughter is thriving at Kindertown, and that Barrows-Crist and the staff are incredible.

Laura Barber with the South Lake Tahoe Women’s Center said Barrows-Crist has always allowed their clients access to her facilities at a reduced rate.

Future for kids

If Kindertown is not able to stay open under Barrows-Crist’s leadership or possibly by an employee, it means losing the \$386,000 the state Department of Education gives the center to pay for low-income families to have child care.

The El Dorado County Office of Education has said it will open a center at the old Al Tahoe Elementary School if Kindertown closes. It would be eligible to receive those state dollars.

More than 6,000 kids have attended Kindertown. The center cares for those ages 6 weeks to 10 years.