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Advocating for safety at camps

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Standing on the sidelines of one of their sports camps, watching 7 to 12 year olds get tips on how to play basketball, Skyhawks Sports Academy staff members announced they were working to make all camps safe for kids.

Skyhawks is a nationwide organization that provides camps to children in more than 60 communities across the state, including Sudbury, Weston and Wayland.

They hope to amend laws created more than 25 years ago that exclude camps organized by municipalities from meeting minimum health and safety standards.

"It excludes municipalities and with that exclusion municipalities have taken it to exclude any outside company that works with them because it's considered a municipality program," said Lisa Hart, east coast regional account manager for Skyhawks.

The state Department of Health has begun pushing communities this year to adhere to the minimum standards, but only about one-third are following through with it, according to Chris Stiles, vice president of Skyhawks.

The regulations in each town vary, with some choosing to enforce the standards and others disregarding them.

"One of the big flaws is that it's up to each Board of Health to interpret and enforce these regulations," Stiles said.

Out of 62 cities and towns Skyhawks works with in Massachusetts, only about 20 require camp companies to meet the minimum safety standards, including Sudbury, Weston, Wayland, Lincoln and Wellesley. Nonetheless, Stiles said Skyhawks has taken a proactive approach and follows the safety standards in all its towns.

Wayland and Weston have worked well with Skyhawks in terms of requiring the minimum safety standards of camps, said Mike Gorfin, the Massachusetts area manager for Skyhawks.

"Wayland and Weston are two of the bigger towns that are really on top of things, their boards of

health," Gorfin said.

The minimum safety standards include collecting medical information, coming up with emergency plans, doing nationwide criminal background checks on camp staff and having trained staff.

"Sudbury requires us and any town group to meet those minimum standards," Hart said. "Other towns do not. They do not require us to show proof of a criminal background. They don't require us to meet (camper to staff) ratios. They don't require us to have health records of our staff or of our kids."

Many communities that do not enforce the safety standards have camps at which there is no requirement for staffers to know first aid or CPR, she said.

What is scary is how many towns do not have these regulations on safety standards, Hart said, as current law does not require it.

"I'm surprised in this day and age that they don't," Rep. Susan Pope, R-Wayland, said.

"If you're a parent, you shouldn't drop your kid off at one camp one week and have one set of standards, and another camp the next week with different standards," Stiles said. "If you drop your kid off ... you expect your directors are going to be CPR certified, you expect background checks, but you're dropping them off and there's no guarantee."

The big push for changes will start this fall, but Hart said they have already received support from legislators.

Stiles encouraged residents to contact their state representative or senator and let them know they support minimum safety standards for all camps.

"We want each camp to have the same standards. I don't think that's too much to ask," Stiles said.

Although the push to change camp standards is only happening in Massachusetts so far, Stiles said once it is approved here, they want to bring it to other states. Skyhawks works with more than 100,000 kids in 25 states.

"Massachusetts is far and away the most progressive in terms of regulating camps. That's why we're putting all our energy in Massachusetts. You're way ahead of the pack," Stiles said.

The first step in making camps safer is writing the legislation to change the current law and then getting other legislators to sign onto the bill, Pope said.

"We need the legislation first. Once Massachusetts does something, other states will look at it and maybe do it," she said.