TEXANS CARE for CHILDREN

Senate Health and Human Services Committee Hearing

April 5th, 2011

SB 506

Members, thank you for the opportunity to offer written comments on SB 506—I am Lauren Dimitry, Health Policy Coordinator at Texans Care for Children. At Texans Care for Children, we look to our broad base of community-based experts—our partners and 147 members throughout the state who together represent hundreds of thousands of Texas children—to inform our work and help us in developing our legislative agenda.

The environment where children live plays a major role in their development and health. Failure to limit harmful substances and pollutants in the environment can adversely affect long-term child wellbeing and achievement. Secondhand smoke, methylmercury, lead, BPA, and air pollution are some of the most widespread—and the most detrimental—environmental factors that affect child health. SB 506 would address this problem by increasing surveying of mercury contamination in fish, crustaceans, molluscan shellfish, and other aquatic and terrestrial animals, lowering the reportable level from 0.7mg/kg to 0.3mh/kg, and better informing the public about findings that indicate a health risk. In addition, this change is an update to reflect where research now indicates there is risk.

Mercury is a toxic chemical that is found in several forms in the environment. Metallic mercury, the liquid metal found in thermometers, is most commonly released into the environment as vapors through mining and manufacturing pollution. Methylmercury, the form that poses the greatest health risk to children, is produced by bacteria in the soil and water and can concentrate in edible fish and shellfish tissue at levels much higher than in the natural environment.[i] Children are at greater risk of exposure to this toxin because they consume more per pound of body weight and because their nervous systems are still developing. This is especially true for fetuses, premature infants, and, to a lesser extent, full-term babies and young children. Methylmercury ingested by a mother during pregnancy can lead to brain damage, cognitive disabilities, lack of coordination, blindness, seizures, inability to speak, nervous and digestive system problems, and kidney damage in her child.[ii]

Some fish, such as swordfish, shark, king mackerel, and tilefish, contain especially high levels of methylmercury. Therefore, the Food and Drug Administration and Environmental Protection Agency advise women who are pregnant or may become pregnant, nursing mothers, and young children to avoid these types of fish. Others, however, such as shrimp, canned light tuna, catfish, salmon, and pollock have lower mercury content and are considered part of a healthy diet when eaten up to twice a week.[iii] While checking local advisories for waterways where fish are caught can limit exposure,[iv] these advisories are only helpful in so far as they adequately warn of possible risk.

SB 506 requires better surveying, online public notifications, distinguishing of specific risks to children, and also enables the Health and Human Services Commission to issue a consumption advisory if mercury levels exceed a level that is lower than currently required. This would help alert pregnant women, nursing mothers, and parents of young children about specific dangers related to mercury consumption and better inform consumption decisions. We thank you for your time, commitment, and consideration of SB 506. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me or the staff of Texans Care for Children at 512.473.2274.

Respectfully,

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[i] "ToxFAQs for Mercury," Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/tfacts46.html.
[ii] "Frequently Asked Questions About Mercury and Thimerosol." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Available: http://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/updates/thimerosal_faqs_mercury.htm. Accessed 12/2009.
[iii] "What You Need to Know About Mercury in Fish and Shellfish." United States Environmental Protection Agency. Available: http://www.epa.gov/fishadvisories/advice/#what. Accessed 1/2010
[iv] "What You Need to Know About Mercury in Fish and Shellfish." United States Environmental Protection Agency. Available: http://www.epa.gov/fishadvisories/advice/#what. Accessed 1/2010.