



SB 758 by Nelson

Senate Health and Human Services Committee

March 22, 2007

Chair Nelson and members of the Health and Human Services Committee, I am Susan Craven, Executive Director Texans Care For Children. We are a non-profit organization composed of over 120 organizations and individuals working to improve the well being of Texas' children. Texans Care For Children's Board is composed of leaders from across the state representing various sectors including business, church, professional, volunteer and non-profit organizations. We advocate for state and local policy that brings about a better quality of life for the children of our state. We provide no direct service; rather we provide information and speak out on issues affecting the children of our state. Each session, in concert with our membership, we develop a legislative agenda that supports efforts to improve the lives of Texas' children in six areas - child poverty, child health care, child mental health, early care and education, child welfare, and juvenile justice.

Child protective services have been a major focus of our organization. In fact our founder, Phil Strickland, was instrumental in establishing the Children's Trust Fund. Last session the legislature took a major step forward in increased funding for child protective services but the focus was on the investigative side. One unintended consequence of bolstering the investigative capacity of CPS is that many conservatorship workers-who work with children already in substitute care-moved to investigations. The shift to investigations has increased the numbers of children in foster care from over 13,000 to over 17,000, but funding was not adjusted to meet the demand causing a crisis in caseloads growth. It is hoped that this session the needed resources will be directed at reducing caseloads of those who watch over the children in out of home placement. Additional funding is needed to dramatically reduce caseloads, presently at one to 45. We have a long way to go in that Texas ranks 47th among the states in public spending on child welfare. Texas spends \$133 per child and the United States average is \$319.

SB 758 does a great deal of good. It provides for:

- in home support services to assist families in which poverty is believed to be a contributing cause of child neglect;
- it removes the independent administrator language;
- it gives new authority to judges to order services;
- it requires special provisions for placement of children under two;

- DFPS is directed to expand use of family group decision making, reduce caseloads for conservatorship and family based safety services, and improve monitoring of foster care facilities and child-placing agencies.

Although SB 758 calls for less privatization of substitute care services, it still mandates that 10% of case management services must be privatized by 2009. Texans Care opposes any outsourcing of case management from the following reasons:

- Privatization has not proved to serve those in need of services very well. We can look to the failed Accenture experiment-thousands of needy families were wrongly denied benefits and the state did not save any money.
- Other states experiments with privatization have not proved to be successful in service to children and families or economically.
- The state is responsible for the children in their care- the state is their conservator- How can the state hand over the responsibility for whether abuse or neglect has occurred, or whether to return a child home, or place a child with a relative, or communications with the judge.

In section 3, there is the requirement that children under 2 have a service plan which is a good idea for all children in the system and should be expanded. But we do have a concern about the therapeutic family visits being supervised by a licensed psychologist. This requirement would limit the pool of professionals, increase the cost of compliance and possibly drive down the number of visits. This would be particularly problematic in rural areas. Children under two need frequent visits with their parents to promote healthy attachment between parent and child and this requirement could limit those visits. Other professionals should be added to this list paying attention to the resources in rural areas.

I cannot close without commenting on the desperate need to provide funding to reduce caseloads for conservatorship and family based safety services staff. By reducing caseloads, some of the turnover problems will be addressed.

As you know, CPS staff has possibly the hardest job in the state. In 2005, an article in the Austin American Statesman entitled: "Saving kids, case by case." This article describes a day in the life of a typical CPS caseworker. I'd like to read just the beginning of what was a truly excellent article.

"Abby Stancik thinks the first person she'll visit on a recent morning will be a Southwest Austin mother accused of breast feeding her baby while drunk. But before she leaves the office parking lot in the northern outskirts of Austin, her supervisor calls and tells her to switch gears: Follow up on a child neglect case that has been upgraded to the most urgent classification: Priority 1.

Within minutes, Stancik loads her Mitsubishi Montero Sport with the child seats she'll need if she has to take the children from their parents and quickly scans the case file. She's about an hour into an emergency duty, day-long shift, typically done once a week, that requires her and other investigators in her unit to respond to the most serious cases of abuse or neglect. She's on "e-duty" until 4:30.

She hopes she won't have to remove any children today. "I used to get really, really anxious," Stancik, 25, says en route. "My stomach hurt real bad, just because of the conflict you have with these families when you go there."

The article went on to describe, in painstaking detail, the various activities that this young woman must do over the course of her "e-day."

Now in 2007, have things changed for this staff person if she is still there? Caseloads are even higher than they were in 2005. The state needs to provide the funding to reduce caseloads dramatically.

Thank you for your time today. Texans Care knows that you will through your deliberation produce a bill that is good for children -for that is what the child welfare system is about –what is best for children in the states care.

Sincerely,

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Executive Director

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