



HB 1912 by Rodriguez: Improving Transition Services for Youth Leaving Foster Care

Senate Health and Human Services Committee

May 12, 2009

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Chairwoman Nelson and members, thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony. Texans Care for Children is a statewide nonpartisan, nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated exclusively to the children of Texas. We look to our broad base of community-based experts—our members and partners who together represent thousands of Texas children—to inform our work and help us in developing our legislative agenda. These partners have empowered Texans Care to mobilize coalition groups to work together towards common solutions to the difficult conditions many Texas children and youth face and to assist local communities in advocating for their own children's needs. Our focus areas are: family economic security; infant, child and maternal health; children's mental health; child welfare; and juvenile justice and at-risk youth.

Background

The process that led to HB 1912 is an important factor in why it is such a good bill. Last summer, as organizations were developing and finalizing legislative priorities for the 81st session, many stakeholders who participate in the Partners in CPS Reform group identified as a priority improving transition services. As the convener and facilitator of Partners in CPS Reform, I pulled together a small working group to delve into the issue because no single organization knew exactly what to recommend to the Legislature. Simultaneously, some of the transition center directors were beginning to work on the issue, so we combined forces. Beginning in August, a working group met to work out the details of a solid legislative proposal; it had participation from:

- transition center directors and staff
- former foster youth
- Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) contract providers
- a foster alumni organization
- staff who work with transitioning youth,
- a research organization
- child and youth advocacy organizations.

Working in parallel were the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) and a couple of legislative offices. The bill that is now before you is one product of the work that began last summer among all of these different entities. It is not the only piece—not included in this bill are important issues like funding for transitional housing and existing transition centers. However, the problems with transitional services are multi-pronged, and HB 1912 is a strong proposal for how to address one of those prongs: systems issues in services to transitional youth.

Problem

HB 1912 is addressing the challenges faced by many youth who are in foster care. Research clearly shows that foster youth experience better outcomes when they have support as they transition to independent living. Compared to their peers who were not in foster care, these youth have lower rates of high school graduation and employment, and higher rates of substance abuse, mental health disorders and criminal justice system involvement. According to the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, four years after leaving care:

- 25 percent of youth who were in care have been homeless,
- Only 46 percent have graduated from high school,
- 42 percent have become parents themselves, and
- Fewer than 20 percent are self-supporting.

Solutions

Texas has a wonderful opportunity to help youth succeed and mitigate social costs associated with unemployment, school dropouts, substance abuse, mental health disorders and incarceration by providing effective, high-quality transitional services to the youth for whom it is the legal parent. HB 1912 would strengthen the foundation of a successful transition to adulthood by:

- Providing the opportunity to learn “experiential” independent life skills in a natural setting, not a classroom environment. Foster care providers would be required to provide individually-tailored learning on essential life skills such as grocery shopping, cooking, using public transportation, doing laundry, and balancing a checkbook.
- Providing continuous, not one-time, access to documents including a birth certificate, social security card, and driver’s license or state ID for youth age 16 and up. Quickly accessing these documents is important to finding meaningful employment as well as obtaining health care and educational benefits to which foster youth are entitled.
- Extending transitional services to youth age 18 and over who are no longer in foster care when the youth is living with the former perpetrator, if that person does not pose a threat to the child’s welfare. Given the reality that many youth do in fact re-connect with their family after aging out, whether DFPS approves of the relationship or not, this change in the law would help youth to do so while receiving transitional support rather than in isolation from support services they had received in the past.
- Requiring DFPS to establish a transitional living services workgroup including former foster youth to assist the Department in developing a state transitional living service plan based on best practices around an individualized approach to independent living services. This is an opportunity for DFPS, youth, and stakeholders to work together on

the kind of systems change that is necessary to support transitioning youth in a way that best meets their needs and makes Texas a leader in reversing the negative outcomes too often associated with time spent in foster care.

Thank you again for your time and commitment, and for favorable passage of HB 1912 from this committee to the full Senate. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me or the staff of Texans Care For Children at 512.473.2274.