

SUBJECT: Employing regional coordinators to investigate child abuse and neglect

COMMITTEE: Human Services — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 5 ayes — Naishtat, Maxey, Chavez, J. Davis, Noriega

0 nays

4 absent — Christian, Telford, Truitt, Wohlgemuth

WITNESSES: For — Leslie Hernandez, National Association of Social Workers

Against — None

On — Sarah Webster, Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services

BACKGROUND: According to *Child Abuse and Neglect Related Deaths in Texas and the Nation*, published by the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (DPRS), 176 children died in Texas as a result of abuse or neglect during fiscal 1998, up from 103 deaths in fiscal 1997. For both years, 36 percent of the children had prior involvement with child protective services.

DIGEST: CSHB 3778 would amend the Family Code to require DPRS to employ at least one investigations coordinator for child protective services in each administrative region to focus solely on child safety issues and on improving the department's effectiveness in protecting children in the region. The bill would stipulate the duties of the coordinator to include:

- ! conducting staff reviews and evaluations of cases involving high risk to children's safety;
- ! monitoring cases in which there have been multiple referrals to DPRS involving the same child, family, or alleged perpetrator; and
- ! approving decisions and assessments related to investigations of high-risk cases.

The bill would take effect September 1, 1999.

SUPPORTERS
SAY:

CSHB 3778 would promote consistent and effective monitoring and coordination of efforts to protect children who are at high risk for abuse or neglect. Cases in which there have been multiple referrals involving young and vulnerable children are more likely to result in serious injury or death. Currently, monitoring and coordination duties are spread among a wide array of staff, including supervisors, program directors, and case workers. For caseworkers in the field, a coordinator would serve as a valuable resource on how to conduct the best investigation possible and on what services would serve children best in high-risk situations.

A designated coordinator in each region could focus greater scrutiny on high-risk cases to identify the factors that could indicate when a child is at greater risk. This would improve assessment of risk so that additional services could be referred or a child could be removed from a harmful situation. Allowing DPRS to increase staff would go hand in hand with other initiatives recommended to increase the agency's efficiency and the protection of children and would give DPRS clear legislative direction to focus a higher level of attention on at-risk children.

In *A Petition in Behalf of the Forsaken Children of Texas*, District Judge Scott McCown recommended that the state use part of the budget surplus projected for fiscal 2000-01 to fund prevention and intervention programs for at-risk children. CSHB 3778 would cost money to implement, but the money would be well spent. Texas can afford to protect its most vulnerable citizens so they have a chance to grow up and become productive members of society instead of becoming grim statistics. An item in the Article 11 "wish list" of HB 1, the general appropriations bill, would appropriate funds to DPRS for this purpose contingent upon enactment of CSHB 3778.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

CSHB 3778 could reduce the agency's flexibility by statutorily requiring DPRS to create a new position and hire staff in each of the department's 11 regions. The agency should be able to address the needs in each region free of statutory restrictions. Some of the smaller regions may not need a coordinator, while some of the larger regions may need more help.

NOTES:

The committee substitute changed the job title from "child protective services safety coordinator" to "child protective services investigations coordinator." It expanded the reference to multiple referrals to include referrals from the same

family and revised the proposed duties of the coordinator.

The Legislative Budget Board estimates that CSHB 3778 would cost the state about \$404,000 in general revenue the first year of implementation and \$353,000 each year thereafter.

The Article 11 wish list in the House-passed version of HB 1 by Junell, the general appropriations bill for fiscal 2000-01, includes a rider appropriating funding necessary to implement HB 3778, contingent on its enactment.