

SUBJECT: Pilot program to address child-protective caseworker shortages

COMMITTEE: Human Services — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 7 ayes — Naishtat, Chavez, J. Davis, Ehrhardt, Noriega, Raymond, Villarreal
0 nays
1 present, not voting — Wohlgemuth
1 absent — Telford

SENATE VOTE: On final passage, April 30 — voice vote

WITNESSES: None

BACKGROUND: Human Resources Code, ch. 40 establishes guidelines for the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (DPRS) in protecting at-risk children and elderly and disabled adults who live at home or in state facilities, investigating allegations of abuse and neglect in state mental health and mental retardation facilities, and regulating and licensing group day-care homes, day-care centers, and registered family homes.

DIGEST: SB 962 would establish a pilot program to address DPRS caseworker shortages in certain areas of the state with the highest number of vacancies and the highest caseworker turnover rate.

The bill would define target regions for the pilot program as those in which fewer than 80 percent of authorized, employed caseworker positions were filled and those that had the highest 12-month caseworker turnover rates.

During the pilot program, DPRS would have to remove the cap on the number of authorized caseworker positions in the region, increase the number of trainee positions by 200 percent, increase the number of training staff, and provide necessary funds to implement the pilot program. DPRS could terminate the pilot program if it were determined that the number of caseworkers met or exceeded the number of authorized positions.

DPRS would be required to submit a report to the Legislature about the progress of the pilot program.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2001.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

SB 962 is needed to help Texas children who need caseworker assistance. The DPRS turnover rates in certain areas of the state, especially Dallas and Tarrant counties, are very high. Hiring caps prevent training academies from enrolling enough caseworker trainees to fill vacancies. Also, trainees count toward the cap even though they are not yet working as caseworkers. The pilot program would help determine if adequate staffing would reduce the turnover rate and ultimately save the state money on training and turnover.

Caseworkers are sorely needed in struggling areas to work with children in abusive and neglectful homes who could be considered crime victims. Money from the crime victims' compensation fund would be appropriately spent in the general appropriations bill on a pilot program to solve the problem of high turnover among DPRS caseworkers.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

One and a half million dollars is too much to spend on a pilot program for a few select counties without some example or guarantee that the money will be used appropriately. Children are in need all over the state, and expending funds that only could be used by specific counties would neglect other Texas children.

It would be inappropriate to fund any of this pilot program with victims' compensation funds, which are designated specifically for victims of crime. Expanding the eligibility for crime victims' funds would limit the amount of revenue available for the purposes for which this fund was established.

NOTES:

According to the fiscal note, SB 962 would cost \$1.5 million for the biennium. Rider 21 in Article 2 of the Senate version of SB 1 by Ellis, the general appropriations bill for the fiscal 2002-03, no longer would count caseworker trainees toward DPRS's full-time equivalent (FTE) cap if additional funds were appropriated to reduce caseloads. Article 2 in both the House and Senate versions of SB 1 would appropriate \$14.2 million to

DPRS for the upcoming biennium from the Crime Victims' Compensation Fund to finance DPRS programs, including caseload reductions.