

SUBJECT: Program allowing charities to contact, aid certain public benefit recipients

COMMITTEE: Human Services — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 8 ayes — Raymond, Rose, Keough, Klick, Naishtat, Peña, Price, Spitzer

0 nays

1 absent — S. King

WITNESSES: For — Bee Moorhead, Texas Impact; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Kathryn Freeman, Christian Life Commission; Melody Chatelle, United Ways of Texas)

Against — None

On — Alice Bufkin, Texans Care for Children; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Kim Bazan, Health and Human Services Commission)

DIGEST: CSHB 2718 would direct the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) to establish a program allowing applicants to need-based government programs to consent to being contacted by charitable community- or faith-based organizations offering supplemental assistance. A person would have to be informed about the program and given the opportunity to enroll at the time they applied for benefits under:

- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families;
- Medicaid;
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; and
- Children's Health Insurance Program.

The bill would require HHSC to develop a procedure for faith-based and community organizations to apply to participate in the program. The HHSC executive commissioner would be required to adopt rules to implement the program, including those:

- describing the types of faith- and community-based organizations that could apply to participate in the program;
- facilitating contact between a person who enrolled in the program and a faith- and community-based organization participating in the program that provided supplemental services; and
- allowing a person enrolled in the program established under this section to terminate enrollment.

The bill would require a state agency to request any waiver from a federal agency necessary to implement a provision of the program, and the state agency could delay implementing that provision until the waiver was granted.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2016, and the commissioner would be required to adopt the rules necessary to implement the program as soon as practicable after that date.

**SUPPORTERS  
SAY:**

CSHB 2718 could help break the cycle of poverty among Texans receiving public assistance by connecting them with nonprofit, faith-based and community-based organizations. These organizations could work with families and individuals to overcome barriers that may be preventing them from becoming self-sufficient.

State employees work hard to help qualifying individuals obtain government benefits, but often are not able to take a personal interest in someone the way a charitable organization could. Volunteers from the selected nonprofits would have time to get to know individuals, set shared goals, and help them achieve those goals. The nonprofits most likely would provide mentoring and other non-monetary supplemental assistance that would not affect participants' income eligibility for need-based government programs.

Many religious and charitable groups have the desire and resources to help struggling families but may not know how to contact those in need. Likewise, applicants for benefits may lack information about community

resources or find it embarrassing to personally contact charities. By matching families with resources, the program would provide a valuable service at little cost to taxpayers. If a match was not working, participants could end their involvement at any time.

The Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) executive commissioner would be the appropriate actor to set the rules for a program that would work for all involved. The bill's effective date of September 1, 2016, would give the commissioner time to develop a well-designed program.

Texas has been a leader for nearly two decades in allowing for greater collaboration between state agencies and charitable organizations. Churches often work with government agencies after natural disasters to provide food and shelter for families. This program would be another opportunity to improve coordination between government and charitable organizations.

OPPONENTS  
SAY:

The bill would grant significant rule-making authority to the HHSC executive commissioner, including rules that would determine which community and faith-based organizations could participate and how those organizations would contact state benefit applicants. This could involve giving private entities access to personal information. With such concerns at stake, it might be better to include details about how the program would operate in statute. A better approach also might be to provide applicants with a list of available services and allow them to contact the outside organizations.

Asking Texans to enroll in the supplemental assistance program at the time they apply for benefits could lead some to think participation was mandatory or to feel pressured to enroll. Problems could arise if a charitable organization provided monetary assistance that affected an individual's income eligibility for a need-based government program. Care would need to be taken that volunteers from faith-based organizations understood they could be serving those with different beliefs and values.

OTHER  
OPPONENTS  
SAY:

While well intentioned, the program proposed under CSHB 2718 could need state funding in order to succeed. A similar program launched in the mid-1990s to help families transitioning from welfare to work suffered because some of the participating nonprofits did not have sufficient financial resources to recruit and train volunteers and match them with families. Some smaller nonprofits could be unable to participate in the program without a reliable funding source.

NOTES:

The Legislative Budget Board's fiscal note estimates that CSHB 2718 could be implemented within existing resources, although HHSC would have costs to establish the program, develop procedures, and modify the Texas Integrated Eligibility Redesign System.

Unlike the original bill, the committee substitute would:

- allow applicants for benefits to request to be contacted by faith- and community-based organizations;
- offer supplemental assistance to applicants for the children's health insurance program; and
- delay the effective date until September 1, 2016.