

SUBJECT: Adding requirements for certain volunteer advocate programs

COMMITTEE: Juvenile Justice and Family Issues — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 7 ayes — Neave, Cook, Frank, Ramos, Talarico, Vasut, Wu

0 nays

2 absent — Swanson, Leach

WITNESSES: For — Sarah Crockett, Texas CASA; Maureen Ball; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Judy Powell, Parent Guidance Center; Andrew Brown, Texas Public Policy Foundation; Molly Weiner, United Ways of Texas)

Against — None

On — Carol Self, Department of Family and Protective Services

BACKGROUND: Family Code sec. 264.601 defines "volunteer advocate program" to mean a volunteer-based, nonprofit program that provides advocacy services to abused or neglected children with the goal of obtaining a permanent placement for the child that is in the child's best interest and complies with recognized standards for volunteer advocate programs.

Family Code sec. 264.604 governs the eligibility of court-appointed volunteer advocate programs for certain contracts. A public or private nonprofit entity maybe be eligible for a contract under this section only if the entity operates a volunteer advocate program that :

- uses individuals appointed as volunteer advocates or guardians ad litem by the court to provide for the needs of abused or neglected children;
- has provided court-appointed advocacy services for at least six months;
- provides court-appointed advocacy services for at least 10 children each month; and

- has demonstrated that the program has local judicial support.

Interested parties have called for improvements to court-appointed volunteer advocate programs in Texas to both strengthen the programs and to provide for greater accountability and transparency.

DIGEST:

CSHB 2973 would amend the Family Code to expand the contract eligibility requirements for public or private nonprofit organizations that operated a court-appointed volunteer advocate program. Under the bill, an entity would be eligible for a contract if the entity operated a program that, in addition to current requirements:

- had adopted a grievance procedure to address complaints regarding negligence or misconduct related to a volunteer advocate's duties; and
- maintained accurate records regarding active volunteer advocates and inactive volunteer advocates under the program.

"Active volunteer advocate" would mean an individual who had been trained by a volunteer advocate program in accordance with recognized standards and was currently serving as a volunteer advocate on at least one child's case.

"Inactive volunteer advocate" would mean an individual who had been trained by a volunteer advocate program in accordance with recognized standards and who was not currently serving as a volunteer advocate.

The bill would require a contract between the Health and Human Services Commission and a statewide nonprofit organization with experience in operating volunteer advocate programs to include measurable goals and objectives relating to the number of active and inactive volunteer advocates in the program.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2021.