

SUBJECT: Caseload standards for DHS and DPRS workers

COMMITTEE: Human Services — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 9 ayes — Hilderbran, Naishtat, Chavez, Christian, Davila, Krusee, Maxey, McReynolds, Wohlgemuth  
0 nays  
0 absent

WITNESSES: For —Aaryl Hayes, Advocacy Inc.; Rick Levy, AFL-CIO; D.L. Dally Willis, Communications Workers of America; Jere Locke; April Rea  
Against — None  
On — Karen Eells, Department of Protective and Regulatory Services; David Shelton, Texas Fathers' Alliance

DIGEST: HB 1945 would allow the commissioner of health and human services to establish caseload standards for caseworkers at the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (DPRS). The commissioner would have to ensure the standards were reasonable, achievable, based on actual caseworker duties and consistent with professional standards and other agencies. Subject to the availability of funds, the human services commissioner and the executive director of DPRS would have to use the established standards to determine the number of personnel to assign as caseworkers for each agency and to assign caseloads to the individual caseworkers.  
  
Recommendations regarding minimum and maximum caseloads for categories of caseworker would be made by two caseload advisory committees, one from DHS and the other from DPRS. The committees would be charged with reviewing professional caseload standards recommended by national organizations of management studies conducted by health and human services agencies. Each committee would be composed of 10 unit supervisors or caseworkers representing the program areas in the agency. The commissioner of health and human services would

appoint advisory committee members from a list submitted by the executive director of each agency. Members of the committee would serve at the pleasure of the commissioner; the commissioner could dissolve the committees if they were no longer necessary.

Provisions for caseload standards and caseload advisory committees would not create a cause of action.

HB 1945 would take effect September 1, 1997. An advisory committee would have to make recommendations by March 1, 1998, and the commissioner of health and human services would have to adopt rules for caseload standards by September 1, 1999.

**SUPPORTERS  
SAY:**

HB 1945 would allow DHS and DPRS to do some necessary long-term planning regarding caseload standards and efficiency levels. Both agencies are experiencing high turnover rates. The average tenure for caseworkers at these agencies is three years; training new caseworkers takes time and several thousands of dollars.

The problems do not stop with training costs but affect the very mission of the agencies. Due to budget cuts, many caseworkers and support staff positions have been eliminated in the past few years. Caseworkers are spending more time filling out paperwork and less time in the field helping families and children. A Child Protective Services caseworker in Texas has an average of 28 cases compared to the national average of 15; an Adult Protective Services caseworker has 42 cases, compared to the national average of 24. High caseloads mean less individual attention. Children, for example, are not moving through the system as quickly as they should but are spending more time in foster care. The lack of caseworker standards raises concerns about the quality and efficiency of services provided.

It is clear that action is needed to improve caseload management. HB 1945 does not propose to legislate caseload standards; complete and accurate information is needed before any changes are made and before any money is spent. Instead, the bill offers a common sense approach that would guide long-range improvement efforts.

This bill does not mandate that any caseworkers be hired or that any action be taken by the commissioner. The bill simply establishes committees to conduct studies and issue recommendations. The commissioner would have discretion to use the committee recommendations to establish caseload standards and could dissolve the committees if they were no longer needed. The Legislature would still retain authority to make the committees ongoing vehicles for information and discussion if that proved necessary.

The committees proposed by HB 1945 would represent a valid cross-section of employees, including the very caseworkers who are on the front lines. Community input would be less important for the efforts of these committees than professional standards that have been researched and studied. Mandating that the committees base their efforts primarily on these standards would ensure the objectivity and accuracy of their recommendations.

OPPONENTS  
SAY:

Allowing the commissioner to appoint the committee members could make these panels simply rubber stamp groups lacking any real debate. Furthermore, there should be some community input to groups dealing with community issues and guarantees of equal representation from diverse groups. Allowing caseworkers to suggest their own work standards could open the door to scaled back recommendations

OTHER  
OPPONENTS  
SAY:

Establishing standards advisory committees would be only the first step to long-range change; the groups should be made standing committees in order to provide an ongoing review mechanism.

NOTES:

The companion bill, SB 543 by Barrientos, has been referred to the Senate Health and Human Services Committee.