

SUBJECT: Strategy for reducing child abuse and neglect and improving child welfare

COMMITTEE: Human Services — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 7 ayes — Rose, S. King, J. Davis, Eissler, Herrero, Naishtat, Pierson

0 nays

2 absent — Hughes, Parker

SENATE VOTE: On final passage, April 11 — 30-0

WITNESSES: For — (*Registered, but did not testify*: Michael Gutierrez)

Against — None

DIGEST: SB 1457 would establish a task force to devise a strategic plan to reduce child abuse and neglect and improve child welfare. In establishing the strategy, the task force would:

- gather information on child safety, child abuse and neglect, and child welfare in Texas;
- review current exemptions from criminal liability for a pregnant mother who injured her unborn child by using certain controlled substances and examine the effect that repealing these exemptions would have on babies born addicted to a controlled substance;
- receive reports and testimony from individuals, state and local agencies, community-based organizations, and public and private organizations; and
- develop policy objectives to improve child safety, child abuse and neglect, and child welfare in Texas

The strategic plan submitted by the task force would include proposals for specific statutory changes, new program creation, and methods to improve cooperation among state agencies and state and local governments. The strategic plan would be submitted to the governor, the lieutenant governor, and the speaker of the House no later than August 1, 2009. The task force would be abolished the following month.

The task force would include individuals who were actively involved in fields of child abuse and neglect and child welfare. A member could not be appointed to or an employee of a state agency. The task force would have 15 members, with the governor, the lieutenant governor, and the speaker of the House each permitted to appoint five. These members would be appointed no later than October 1, 2007.

A presiding officer would be elected by a majority vote of the task force members. The task force would meet at the call of the presiding officer. Members would not be compensated for their services on the task force but would be reimbursed for travel expenses.

This act would take effect September 1, 2007.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

SB 1457 would help the state address the serious and growing concern of child abuse and neglect. Across the state, more than 50,000 children are confirmed abuse victims each year. The number of children in foster care as a result of child abuse increased by 30 percent between 2001 and 2005 in Texas. Child abuse and neglect leads to the death of more than three children daily in the United States. Under the bill, a new task force on child abuse and neglect would determine the most cost-effective approach to prevent and end the victimization of children at the hands of abusers.

The state currently invests more than \$900 million annually in investigation, care placement, and treatment costs associated with child abuse. Only a small portion of this funding is used to promote positive parenting and adopt preventative measures to stop child abuse. In general, a dearth of preventative programs exists, despite the fact that early intervention is needed to curtail the increase of child abuse and neglect. The state's objective should be to shrink the need for monolithic state programs by investing in more cost-effective programs and policies. The task force would examine preventative programs in other states to determine the programs and policies that best promote child welfare and healthy families.

The creation of the task force would not create a negative fiscal impact for the state. Moreover, the strategic plan ultimately could reduce costs to the state. Incidents of child abuse and neglect require Texas to invest funding in health care provision, juvenile delinquency, adult crimes, foster care, and other services. The strategic plan would promote the adoption of strategies designed ultimately to reduce such costs.

The statewide task force to prevent child abuse would be modeled after the success of Bexar County's Blue Ribbon Task Force. Comprised of various local leaders and community members, the local task force works to prevent child abuse and neglect in the San Antonio area. The task force was formed in 2004 after several high-profile incidents of deaths resulting from child abuse and neglect.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

No apparent opposition.