

SUBJECT: Establishing the child welfare assessment task force

COMMITTEE: Human Services — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 6 ayes — Raymond, Morrison, Gonzalez, Hopson, Hunter, Naishtat

2 nays — Laubenberg, V. Taylor

1 absent — Hughes

SENATE VOTE: On final passage, April 26 — 31-0

WITNESSES: For — Ashley Harris, Texans Care for Children; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Jane Burstain, Center for Public Policy Priorities; Carrie Kroll, Texas Pediatric Society; Diana Martinez, TexProtects, The Texas Association for the Protection of Children; Susan Milam, National Association of Social Workers/Texas Chapter; Jason Sabo, Children at Risk; Gyl Switzer, Mental Health America of Texas; Theresa Tod, Texas Network of Youth Services; Michael Gutierrez)

Against — None

On — Michael Martinez, Department of Family and Protective Services

DIGEST: SB 681 would create the child welfare assessment task force. The task force would study the assessments used by the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) in placing and providing services to children. By December 1, 2012, the task force would have to submit a report to the Health and Human Services (HHSC) commissioner containing findings and recommendations on tools that providers used when conducting behavioral assessments of children in the child welfare system and guidelines on the contents of assessment reports.

If the recommendations were generally accepted standards and could be implemented with existing fiscal resources, DFPS would be required to implement them by September 1, 2013.

The commissioner would have to make appointments to the task force by January 1, 2012. The members would include a person from the National Association of Social Workers Texas Chapter, a person from the Texas Psychological Association, a person from the Texas Foster Family Association, a person working with DFPS's public-private partnership on foster care redesign, a current or former foster care child who received mental health services, a child welfare system advocate, a judge, a parent, a person from DFPS, a person from HHSC, and three clinicians with experience in trauma-informed assessments.

The members would elect a presiding officer, who would call meetings at his or her discretion.

The task force would be abolished on September 1, 2014.

The bill would take effect immediately if it receives two-thirds vote from each house. Otherwise, it would take effect on September 1, 2011.

**SUPPORTERS  
SAY:**

The initial assessment of a child when he or she enters the child welfare system arguably is the most critical step in providing needed services. Judges, caseworkers, and welfare providers use these assessments to determine appropriate placements, levels of medication, and other services that the child needs.

Currently, there is little consistency on how various providers conduct these assessments. The reports have different formats, content, analyses, and recommendations. The lack of standardization makes the quality of the assessment vary dramatically among providers. This drives up costs when the assessments are inaccurate and have to be duplicated after the child's initial entrance into the child welfare system.

SB 681 would standardize these assessments by creating the child welfare assessment task force. Thirteen experts from inside and outside government would provide a list of tools providers could use when conducting these assessments, along with guidelines on publishing the final reports. These standardized forms would provide DFPS the information it needed to provide care for a child, while saving money by not having to duplicate the initial assessments.

Finally, the child welfare assessment task force would not cost the state any money, and would Sunset once it has provided its recommendations to DFPS.

**OPPONENTS SAY:** SB 681 would create yet another unnecessary government task force. DFPS is fully capable of working with outside experts and interested parties to create a standardized format for child welfare assessments without the creation of an unnecessary new task force.