

Minutes
Senate Committee on Children and Youth and the House Committee on
Aging, Children and Youth, Legislative and Military Affairs
Meeting Jointly
Wednesday, November 18, 2015

The Senate Committee on Children and Youth and the House Committee on Aging, Children and Youth, Legislative and Military Affairs met jointly on Wednesday, November 18, 2015, at 10:00 a.m., in Room 171 of the State Capitol Building in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Committee members present: *Senators* Stephanie Flowers, Chair; Alan Clark, Jonathan Dismang, Jane English, Missy Irvin, Bobby J. Pierce and Greg Standridge. *Representatives* George B. McGill, Chair; Karilyn Brown, Vivian Flowers, Bob Johnson, Julie Mayberry, David Meeks, Marcus E. Richmond, Sue Scott, James Sturch and DeAnn Vaught.

Non-committee members present: *Senators* Bill Sample, Larry Teague and Eddie Joe Williams. *Representatives* John Baine, Scott Baltz, Charlie Collins, Charlotte Vining Douglas, R. Trevor Drown, Kenneth B. Ferguson, Jeremy Gillam, Sheilla Lampkin, Joe Jett and Kelly Linck.

Representative McGill called the meeting to order.

Consideration to approve minutes of October 6, 2015 [EXHIBITS C]

Senator Flowers made a motion to approve the October 6, 2015, meeting minutes and Senator Pierce seconded the motion. Without objection the minutes were approved.

Consideration to Adopt Interim Study Proposal (ISP) 2015-145 by Representative David Meeks [EXHIBIT D]

“REQUESTING THAT THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL REFER TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON AGING, CHILDREN AND YOUTH, LEGISLATIVE AND MILITARY AFFAIRS AN INTERIM STUDY TO CONDUCT A FISCAL AND LEGISLATIVE ANALYSIS REGARDING IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS CONTAINED IN THE JULY 6, 2015 REVIEW OF THE DIVISION OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES CONDUCTED BY THE CHILD WELFARE POLICY AND PRACTICE GROUP”

Senator Flowers made a motion to adopt ISP 2015-145, Representative Vaught seconded the motion. Without objection the ISP was adopted.

Representative McGill recognized Ms. Betty Guhman, Senior Advisor, Office of Governor Asa Hutchinson and Child Welfare Advisor for the Child Welfare Oversight Panel (Panel). Ms. Guhman gave an overview of the Arkansas Child Welfare Initiative (Handout #1). In March of 2015 Governor Hutchinson commissioned a review of the child welfare system by Paul Vincent of the Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group. Details of the report are outlined in the handout.

Governor Hutchinson accepted all of the recommendations outlined in the July 6 report and invited stakeholders from the legislative, judicial, and executive branches, service providers, and child advocacy groups to serve on the Panel. The Panel will ensure meaningful stake holder involvement in all aspects of planning and development related to the reform.

The panel is divided into work groups to address the recommendations. The Panel has had one meeting to discuss the recommendations. The Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is currently developing action plans around all of the recommendations.

Ms. Guhman informed the committee that the Panel and the working groups plan to meet monthly and will submit a monthly report to the Governor as well as to the Senate Children and Youth Committee and the House Aging Children & Youth Committee.

Representative McGill recognized Representative Meeks; he briefly outlined the purpose of ISP 2015-145 and the importance of Child Welfare Reform.

Senator Flowers asked, "what is the timeline for work groups to present proposals for the upcoming fiscal session". Representative Meeks replied that the work groups plan to submit their proposals by March, 2016.

Discussion of Child Welfare Reform in Arkansas, Cecile Blucker, Director, Department of Human Services, Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS)

Ms. Blucker recognized various workers in leadership positions from across the state who provide services in the field and asked that the chair recognize them for input. She pointed out that there are 4,599 children currently in the child welfare system. There are 7600 children being served in protective service cases. The number one issue according to Ms. Blucker is the lack of case workers to handle the high volume of cases as well as finding qualified applicants. The agency has hired 50% of its caseworkers within the last year due to a high turnover rate.

Representative McGill recognized Ms. Lisa Jensen, Area Director (Area 2) comprised of: Sebastian, Crawford, Franklin, Johnson, Scott, Logan and Yell Counties. Area 2 has almost 600 foster children, with a total of 900 children covering her seven county region. One-third of the children are placed within Area 2, with the remainder being placed outside the area. Area 2 currently has 9 vacancies in Sebastian County and 8 in the remaining counties. It is impossible to efficiently handle the caseloads; being overworked, traveling, high turnover, and dealing with other demanding requirements.

Ms. Jensen mentioned that the agency is structuring an internship program with the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith, Social Work Program to give students firsthand experience.

Representative McGill recognized Ms. Cassandra Scott, Area Director (Area 10) comprised of: Ashley, Chicot, Desha, Drew, Arkansas, Lee, St. Francis, Monroe and Phillip Counties. Ms. Scott stated that the Delta area is one of the highest poverty stricken areas within the state and noted this can affect placement for children. Area 10 has over 300 foster children and encounters some of the same challenges as mentioned in Area 2. The working relationship between the caseworkers and Ad- Litem is good but there is room for improvement.

Representative Flowers inquired about the status of the Kinship Foster Care Program and if and how can the program serve as a resource for more foster homes. Ms. Scott replied the program is being utilized however, there are some barriers such as: background checks, waiver issues, space issues, and income.

In summary the Area Directors noted the following concerns; lack of caseworkers, retention of caseworkers, reduction in caseloads, placement stability, recruitment and retention of foster parents, and availability of resources (mental health providers, placements, etc.).

Representative McGill recognized Ms. Tiffany Wright, Family Services Worker, (White County). Ms. Wright noted that she handles 32 cases which include 40 to 45 foster kids and if divided by a 40 hour work week equals only 1.25 hours per case. These hours include multiple home visits, writing court reports, documentation in CHRIS (Child Reporting Information System), court attendance, staffing, assisting with visitation (in the absence of a program assistant), medical appointments, placement disruptions and travel time. She noted the stress of heavy caseloads and on-call responsibility as reasons leading to high turnover.

Ms. Wright stated that reduced caseloads, more resources; particularly, substance abuse programs and counselors would help to eliminate some of the recurring problems that exist. Drug rehabilitation programs that would take parent and child would also be very helpful. Quicker access to relatives, more program assistants, and getting rid of the on-call responsibility are things that can be done to help the family service workers who really want to provide needed services to children and families.

Representative Mayberry asked if there are any solutions to substance abuse. Ms. Wright recommended having aggressive substance abuse treatment programs noting also that it is not realistic to see the effects of the treatment immediately, indicating the inevitability of the abuser relapsing which is a part of recovery.

Representative McGill recognized Ms. Felecia Stone a Foster Parent from Cleburne County. Ms. Stone indicated that she has been a foster parent for 3 ½ years; recruited and trained through The CALL. She shared her experiences as a foster parent, the ups and downs of foster parenting noting that it is important for families to feel supported. She serves as a Parent Support Coordinator for The CALL. One of the barriers to foster parenting is the time it takes to get a home opened.

Representative McGill recognized Ms. Lauri Currier, Executive Director, The CALL. Her focus is on the statewide efforts of The CALL. The CALL was formed as a result of Christians from the Pulaski County area speaking to DCFS and voicing their interest in wanting to play a part in the Child Welfare System. Not only in Arkansas but across the nation, The CALL is a leader in this area.

The CALL is a “replicable non-profit model built to bring awareness to the church of the needs of children in foster care by advocating, equipping, and encouraging the Christian community to provide a future and a happy home for the kids”. The CALL exists in 34 of Arkansas’ 75 counties and has an additional 7 counties that are working towards a launch. Over 3,000 people have attended an informational meeting held by The CALL, and some 1600 foster and adoptive families have been trained; 1100 homes have been opened to serve kids in foster care or to adopt. The CALL is supported by churches, families, foundations and corporations. In closing, she announced the National Adoption Day, being held on November 19th, with a press conference at the Pulaski County Courthouse at 2:00 p.m.

Representative Mayberry suggested to the committee that the information provided today was very informative and asked that future meetings focus more on real time information and less on data.

Representative Meeks announced that the Panel will be meeting on November 19th at 3:00 p.m. in Room 149 of the State Capitol.

The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, December 8, 2015 at 1:00 p.m.

With no further business, the meeting adjourned at 12:35 p.m.

DRAFT