

Committee on Children, Families, and Elder Affairs

CS/SB 1666 — Child Welfare

by Appropriations Committee; Children, Families, and Elder Affairs Committee; and Senators Sobel and Gibson

The bill makes numerous changes to laws and programs intended to protect children from abuse and neglect. The bill modifies requirements for child abuse investigation services provided by the Department of Children and Families and in some counties the sheriff's office. The bill also amends laws establishing the state's privatized child welfare services through the community-based care agencies. Specifically, the bill:

- Amends the purposes of ch. 39, F.S., relating to child protection and the foster care system to emphasize that the safety of children is the paramount concern in the dependency process.
- Establishes a new Assistant Secretary for Child Welfare in the Department of Children and Families to provide direction and expertise in child welfare.
- Establishes a "Critical Incident Rapid Response Team" to quickly investigate child abuse deaths where the child was known to the child welfare system. The investigation is to determine the root causes and determine how the child welfare system failed to protect the child.
- Requires the Department of Children and Families to publish on its website basic information about all child abuse deaths.
- Strengthens provisions relating to safety plans for children who have been abused, neglected, or abandoned by their caregivers. Safety plans are used by the department, and in some counties the sheriff's office, to set conditions whereby the child can safely remain in the home.
- Clarifies the relationship between the Department of Children and Families and community-based care agencies in dependency proceedings. The bill states that attorneys in the dependency process represent the Department of Children and Families, but must also consider the recommendations of the community-based care agency case managers.
- Defines "medically complex children" and "medical neglect" and requires the Department of Children and Families to have the medical expertise to investigate such cases.
- Directs that the Department of Children and Families investigate all calls of child-on-child sexual abuse among dependent children that are reported to the abuse hotline.
- Strengthens the requirement for the Department of Children and Families to keep siblings together when they are removed from their homes.
- Extends the requirement of the Rilya Wilson Act that children in the child welfare system attend preschool to those children under three years of age.
- Expands the current relative caregiver provisions to provide compensation to qualified non-relatives who provide homes for dependent children.
- Expands the scope of the work of the Child Abuse Death Review Committees in the Department of Health. The bill requires that the committees investigate all child deaths

reported to the abuse hotline, rather than just those deaths that the department finds were verified for abuse.

- Establishes a preference for hiring social workers as child protective investigators. The bill sets a goal for half of all Department of Children and Families investigators to be social workers by 2019. The bill allows other qualified workers to be hired, but directs the department to provide them with specialized training within a specified amount of time on the job.
- Creates a tuition exemption and loan forgiveness program to attract social workers to work in child welfare. The bill authorizes payments of up to \$3,000 per year to pay student loans of child welfare personnel with a social work degree.
- Creates a new part V of ch. 409, F.S., to be entitled “Community-Based Child Welfare.” In this new part, current law relating to community-based care is reorganized, obsolete provisions are removed, and some provisions are clarified.
- Establishes a new criminal offense for so called “re-homing” when an adopted child is given up illegally to another family.
- Establishes the Florida Institute for Child Welfare comprised of the state’s public and private university schools of social work to advise the state on child welfare policy, social work education, and child welfare worker training.

If approved by the Governor, these provisions take effect July 1, 2014, except where otherwise provided.

Vote: Senate 37-0; House 117-0