



Florida Children's Services Council

Capitol Connection

News from our State and Nation's Capitol about children and families

Week 1

March 9, 2007

2007 Legislative Report for Week of March 6

"We must raise the profile of all children's issues, from education to health. As stewards of this state, our greatest obligation is to our children. But often, it is their voice that goes unheard, or overlooked."

Governor Charlie Crist – 2007 State of the State Address

The bright spot for the week is the strong statement of principle in Governor Crist's State of the State address on Tuesday. He highlighted creation of a Children's Cabinet as a top priority and clearly articulated his commitment to children's issues. His support will be key to advancing the CSC agenda. The FCSC team's recent meeting with the governor's staff on KidCare legislation seems to affirm his commitment to children's issues and the goals he outlined in his speech.

Of course, the first week of Session also resulted in passage by two House committees of property tax reform legislation that would alarm anyone involved in delivering public services at the local level. HB 7001 is described below. The FCSC Tallahassee Team is working to reach out to legislative leaders about the impacts of various reform proposals on young children and their families.

The Senate has yet to unveil its plan, but is expected to do so within the next week or two. The hope is that the Senate will show restraint and deliberate carefully about its proposals so as not to create another crisis for the state. Sen. Haridopolos, a key member on this issue, spoke to the need to provide tax relief to commercial property owners who have not benefited from Save Our Homes. He has also expressed interest in addressing just valuation of property.

Property Tax Reform

HB 7001 (formerly PCG GEAC 1) relating to property tax reform was heard on 3/7/07 in the House Government Efficiency & Accountability Council. The House proposal would roll back property tax rates to 2001 levels and then adjust them upward for inflation and population growth. School districts would not be affected by the rollback. Most other local taxing authorities could collect only future taxes based on the rate of inflation, as calculated by the national consumer price index. However, the bill allows the taxing authority to exceed these rates with a supermajority vote of its governing body.

The bill was sponsored by Rep. Frank Attkisson (R-Kissimmee). Speaking in opposition to the bill were representatives from the Florida Association of Counties, the Florida League of Cities, and the Broward County Board of Commissioners. The bill was approved in a partisan vote, 10-5.

The House Policy and Budget Council held a workshop on Friday to discuss and hear testimony on HB 7001. Discussion centered around the rollback and a phase-in. The bill will likely be passed out of the House Policy and Budget Council on March 16. If approved, the bill goes to the House floor.

KidCare

The Senate Health Policy Committee discussed the Proposed Committee Substitute for **SB 930** by Sen. Mandy Dawson (D-Ft. Lauderdale) on Wed., March 7. The bill codifies the recommendations of the Senate Interim Project Report 2007-131, "The KidCare Program: Organizational Streamlining and Administrative Simplification."

The proposed committee substitute creates the Florida Commission on Children's Health in the Executive Office of the Governor. The proposed nine member commission would be responsible for identifying and developing specific strategies to address children's lack of access to high-quality and affordable health care services and health care coverage.

The bill also expands Medicaid eligibility for a limited time to allow families to transition from Title XIX to Title XXI funded components without a gap in coverage, eliminates contradictory eligibility coverage and allows health plans to conduct marketing and outreach for the program.

An amendment was offered by Sen. Dawson to consolidate the administrative activities of the KidCare program through the Agency for Health Care Administration (AHCA) effective July 1, 2008.

Both the bill and the amendments were temporarily postponed, but significant debate and testimony occurred. Concerns were expressed regarding whether an administrative consolidation within AHCA would be effective in removing the current administrative barriers, the need to include groups such as legal immigrants and the children of state employees, and the need and cost for doing so since these groups are not eligible for a federal match.

The bill will likely be brought back to the committee in a substantially different form for a vote next week or the following week.

VUPK

The House Committee on K-12, chaired by Rep. Anitere Flores (R-Miami) met on Tuesday, March 6, to discuss the Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Program. Presentations were made by Shan Goff (ED, Office of Early Learning, DOE), Gladys Wilson (Deputy Director, Office of Early Learning, AWI), Debby Russo (Director of Child Care, DCF) and Susan Main (ED, ELC of Duval County). In addition, the Committee heard testimony from David Lawrence, Board Chair, Early Childhood Initiative Foundation and The Children's Trust.

Committee members heard testimony on each of the state agencies' roles and functions in the administration of VUPK, including enrollment statistics and 2006-07 outcome data from the Florida Kindergarten Rating System that were recently released. Agency legislative budget requests were also reviewed. AWI suggested that efficiency and accountability could be improved if ELCs were funded for non-direct services similar to the 14 percent rate allowed in the School Readiness program for monitoring and accountability activities. Ms. Main also raised the point about the need. An update on the Early Learning Information System and activities to address obstacles to VUPK participation were also shared.

Mr. Lawrence made an impassioned plea for establishment of quality standards, including teacher credentials, pre- and post assessments, standard curricula and increased funding for outreach as well as increased provider funding. In combination, these efforts would remove some of the obstacles and disincentives for providers and families who are currently not participating in VUPK.

There seemed to be great interest in improving the VUPK program by members of the committee.

Child Care Funding

On Thursday, the Senate Committee on Transportation & Economic Development Appropriations heard a presentation by Gladys Wilson from AWI/OEL about the proposed funding formula. Several speakers expressed concern about the new formula and received a positive reception from the committee members.

In addition, meetings are being held with key legislators and the Governor's office to seek support for additional funding to hold communities harmless from any funding formula changes and to eliminate the waiting list for subsidized care.

Announcements from FCSC

FCSC Open House in Tallahassee

The Open House at the FCSC office in Tallahassee is scheduled for Thursday, March 29, in conjunction with the two-day FCSC board meeting. Key dignitaries have been invited, including the Governor, legislators, department agency heads and members from various advocate organizations. Also, the counties, cities and school boards associations will be in Tallahassee for their legislative days and it is Children's Week.

Add Us to Your Address Book

To ensure you can reach your FCSC staff in Tallahassee, add this information to your address books:

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