



Florida Children's Services Council

Capitol Connection

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

Week 6

April 13, 2007

2007 Legislative Report for Week of April 9

After a relatively quiet fifth week in Tallahassee, week six started with renewed energy as the 2007 Legislative Session turned the corner into the frantic and final three weeks. This week began with very positive movement on KidCare. Governor Charlie Crist released a draft bill to streamline KidCare that received widespread support from a number of child advocacy organizations. During a separate press event at the Capitol, the Governor announced his support for a requirement to have a degreed lead teacher in every Florida pre-k classroom by 2013. The debate over property taxes heated up again with the Senate's release of its long-awaited property tax reform package, which would provide \$11 billion in savings to taxpayers over the next five years. The bill appears not to include special taxing districts in the tax rate rollback provisions.

With three weeks to go until the end of session, the Legislature is getting down to "crunch" time. The real challenge to passing remaining bills will be to get them on the calendar quickly as next week will be the last planned committee week.

KidCare

SB 930 by Sen. Mandy Dawson (D-Ft. Lauderdale) will be heard on Tuesday, April 17, in the Health and Human Services Appropriations Committee. Similarly, the House is scheduled to hear the Healthy Families draft bill by Rep. Bill Galvano (R-Bradenton) in the Health Council that same day.

The Governor has released a KidCare proposal that includes the main elements of streamlining the program as contained in SB 930. The primary difference is the creation of a Deputy Secretary of KidCare in the Agency for Health Care Administration (AHCA). Among other things, the Deputy Secretary shall: identify and develop specific strategies for addressing issues related to children's lack of access to KidCare program services; study barriers to children's access to high quality and affordable health care services and health care coverage; identify and provide recommendations for ways to improve KidCare service delivery; review federal and state legislation; study and make recommendations to refine the eligibility determination process; and, analyze the responsiveness of state government to the health needs of uninsured children and the appropriateness of the response.

Subject to a specific appropriation, the bill also authorizes premium assistance through state funds or local contributions for children of legal immigrants and state employees.

In addition, the Governor's proposal eliminates the Healthy Kids Board and the Coordinating Council, but does establish a KidCare Commission to be chaired by the Chief Financial Officer, which shall be administratively housed in AHCA and have the following duties: provide strategic leadership for the program; set performance measures and program goals; make recommendations to the Legislature regarding changes to the program that will enhance accountability; and increase the ability of the program to serve children and provide other program improvements. The bill also provides for the Department of Children and Families to develop a standardized application form. Furthermore, the bill creates a standardized benefits package with the amount, duration, and scope based on the Medicaid program.

Hopefully, the Governor's draft bill will be accepted as a "strike and replace" amendment in both the House Health Care Council and the Senate Health and Human Services Appropriations Committee.

Property Tax Reform

The Senate unveiled highlights of its property tax reform package on Thursday, April 12. Finance and Tax Committee Chair Sen. Mike Haridopolos (R-Melbourne), along with other Senate members, explained components of the proposal, which differ greatly from the House plan. The Senate proposal addresses homesteaders, non-homesteaders, and commercial owners and, as anticipated, does not include an increase in the state sales tax. It is estimated to save Florida taxpayers \$11 billion over the next five years.

Provisions of the Senate proposal include a tax-rate rollback to FY 2005-2006, and a cap starting in 2008 on city and county property tax revenue increases. The proposal allows Florida homeowners to take existing tax breaks with them when they move, as well as special exemptions for first-time homebuyers. Additional provisions call for greater transparency in local governments' budgets, clarification of the "highest and best use" standard, and a \$25,000 exemption on tangible personal property for businesses. An affordable housing provision states that taxes would be based on rent collected, rather than market value to encourage landlords to reduce rents.

Specific references to special taxing districts in the draft bill include a requirement that all special taxing districts provide electronic access to their budget information no later than the date of the TRIM notice. Also, no later than November 1, 2009, special taxing districts would have to electronically post contracts of \$5,000 or more executed on or after Oct. 1, 2009.

The Senate's draft bill is scheduled to be heard in the Finance and Tax Committee on Tuesday, April 17. Please note that the Senate bill language is still very fluid and will continue to evolve over the next few weeks so vigilance is crucial.

Appropriations

The House and the Senate both passed their respective budgets this week. The Senate appointed its budget conferees today. The House is expected to appoint budget conferees on Monday and begin the process of negotiating a joint conference report.

Children's Cabinet

SB 564 by Sen. Nan Rich (D- Sunrise) creates a Children and Youth Cabinet and was heard this week in the Senate Governmental Operations Committee where two amendments were introduced. A committee substitute was passed favorably and the next stop is the Senate Health and Human Services Appropriations Committee on April 17. This is the companion bill to **HB 509** introduced in the House by Rep. Loranne Ausley (D-Tallahassee), which is currently in the House Healthcare Council.

Foster Care/Dependency System

HB 77 by Rep. Ari Porth (D-Coral Springs) requires restrictions on visitation or contact by any person involved in a proceeding initiated in Dependency Court when there are allegations or convictions of sexual abuse or exploitation. It strikes a balance between the child's right to safety and protection, and parental rights. Additionally, it requires a court hearing and strict standards, in the best interest of a child who may have been sexually abused. The bill passed the House 114-0 on April 12. **SB 570** by Sen. Nan Rich (D-Sunrise) has not been heard in Committee.

HB 509 by Rep. Will Kendrick (R-Carabelle), among other provisions relating to dependency, replaces "goals for dependent children" with "standards for dependent children and youth." The bill amends a number of the current goals and creates four additional standards. It is awaiting third reading on the House floor.

SB 2400 by Sen. Wilson (D-Miami Gardens) passed with a unanimous vote of the Senate Children, Families & Elder Affairs Committee on Tuesday, April 10. Similarly, the House bill by Rep. Cusack passed unanimously from the House Infrastructure & Economic Development Council on Thursday, April 12. There was discussion about adding an amendment at the next meeting to add private Gold Seal child care centers to the group of public Gold Seal child care centers which would offer priority placement for abused and neglected children.

Independent Living

SB 2114 by Sen. Nan Rich (D-Sunrise) passed unanimously out of the Senate Judiciary Committee and is now in HHS Appropriations. The bill, sponsored in the House by Rep. Rich Glorioso (R-Plant City), builds on the incremental improvements to the Road to Independence Program designed to assist young adults transitioning from foster care placements. If enacted, the bills would ensure services for youth who, after reaching 16 years of age, are placed in a “permanent guardianship” arrangement, allow youth in foster care to obtain bank accounts at age 16, provide Medicaid coverage up until a former foster youth’s 21st birthday and permit a case worker to sign an application for a driver’s license for a foster care youth without assuming personal responsibility for any willful misconduct, only if the signature is made pursuant to a court-approved transition plan.

Child Care Waiting List

Last week, Teresa Tinker, Council Staff Director of the Economic Expansion & Infrastructure Council for Chair Rep. Dean Cannon (R-Winter Park), agreed to review data on the child care waiting list of four-year olds statewide. In order to compile data as quickly as possible, the majority of the CSCs worked with the Early Learning Coalitions in their counties to compile waiting list data and send it to Tallahassee. The FCSC was able to compile all the data into a single report, along with data provided by the Agency for Workforce Innovation, and provide it to Teresa. Due to a tight budget year, it is not likely additional funding will be allocated. However, the compilation of the data lays the groundwork for future consideration. Thank you to all the CSCs who gathered the child care waiting list data so quickly.

FCSC News

2007 CSCF Conference is Next Month

Plans for the 2007 FCSC Conference are well underway, and we anticipate a very productive and enjoyable event. The meeting will take place May 21-23 at the Orlando Omni ChampionsGate Hotel. Please note that hotel reservations must be made by **April 17** to take advantage of the group room rate and availability. For details on the conference agenda, registration and hotel information, visit:

<http://www.peopleware.net/index.cfm?siteID=457&eventDisp=CSC07>

This issue of Capitol Connection brought to you by The Firm, composed of CSC legislative liaisons around the state. Please contact Firm Chair Diana Ragbeer, Director of Public Affairs and Communications with The Children’s Trust, at diana@thechildrenstrust.org or Vivian Alarcon, CEO, Florida Children’s Services Council at valarcon@floridacsc.org with questions regarding legislative issues in this newsletter.