



Florida Children's Services Council

Capitol Connection

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

Week 7

April 20, 2007

2007 Legislative Report for Week of April 16 - UPDATE

With many high-stakes issues for Florida yet unresolved, and only 10 days (plus weekends) remaining in the Regular Session, efforts turned this week to a very busy budget conference process. The process was delayed a bit with official meetings starting Friday due to the challenges in finalizing the allocations to each committee.

The House and Senate passed widely different proposals for property tax reform, and now must work to find common ground. A push by healthcare and children's advocates to seek additional program improvements and gain additional funding for KidCare recaptured attention from the Governor and key legislators in the House and Senate. A coordinated media outreach effort by the advocates also resulted in positive coverage in several newspapers statewide. This week also saw continued activity on QRS. Committees will cease by Wednesday of next week.

KidCare

There was a flurry of very positive activity on KidCare this week spawned in large part by Gov. Crist's continued engagement in this issue and the yeoman's work performed by Reps. Lorraine Ausley (D-Tallahassee), Bill Galvano (R-Bradenton), Rene Garcia (R-Hialeah), and Juan Zapata (R-Miami) in the House. In the Senate, Senators Mandy Dawson (D-Ft. Lauderdale), Durrell Peadar (R-Crestview), Nan Rich (D-Sunrise) and Frederica Wilson (D-Miami Gardens) showed real leadership in moving the bills forward despite budget challenges. Several other senators, including Sen. Jim King (R-Jacksonville) have also asked to be signed on as bill co-sponsors.

Both House and Senate bills were heard in their respective appropriations committees within minutes of each other on the morning of Tuesday, April 17. Both bills need continued improvement. However, the House bill in particular showed significant improvement over the previous version heard weeks before as follows:

- Deletes Medicaid reform from the KidCare program
- Includes premium portability
- Includes the choice of a Medicaid plan or one under Healthy Kids
- Eliminates the 10 percent cap on "full pay" enrollees
- Eliminates the "look back" period to determine if employer options were exhausted
- Moves most functions to the Agency for Health Care Administration (AHCA)
- Places outreach and eligibility determination in the Department of Children and Families
- Retains CMS in the Department of Health
- Dissolves the Florida Healthy Kids board and completes consolidation by July 1, 2010
- Provides for qualified legal immigrants and state employees with state and local funds

The Senate version contains many of the features of the House bill, but also does the following:

- Changes Healthy Kids benefits to the richer Medicaid benefits package
- Creates a Deputy Secretary for children's health under AHCA
- Contains a much more accelerated timeframe for consolidation with most of the consolidation to take place by July 1, 2008

- Places outreach under AHCA
- Provides for qualified legal immigrants, but not state employees

The focus now shifts to the funding. As children’s health advocates this week pointed out, this will be only a partial victory if the program improvements are not funded. Advocates are asking the legislature to restore the full \$50 million that was cut last year in order to draw down additional federal dollars. However, understanding the challenges of a tough budget year, CSCs are asking at a minimum that the legislature fund the following priorities: \$4 million for outreach, \$5 million for state employees, and \$5 million for the children of legal immigrants.

Acknowledgement: Thanks to writer Mike Malone, with The Children’s Trust, who visited the FCSC office and attended numerous legislative meetings in Tallahassee to understand through the eyes of a reporter what the process looks like. We look forward to a number of op-ed pieces and other work throughout the remaining days of session.

Take Action: Funding is critical to support the positive KidCare reforms under consideration. The budget process is happening now. Please contact members of your delegation, as well as the members of the Senate Health and Human Services Appropriations Committee and House Health Policy and Budget Council, and request that, in addition to the \$18 million already appropriated, they fund an additional: \$4 million for outreach, \$5 million for state employees, and \$5 million for the children of legal immigrants. Special thanks should go to Gov. Crist, Senate President Pruitt, House Speaker Rubio, Senators Dawson, Peadar Kirby, Rich, Wilson, Gaetz and Saunders, as well as Reps. Galvano, Ausley, Garcia, Harrell, and Zapata.

Property Tax Reform

The Florida House and Senate approved separate plans this week to lower property taxes.

The House plan promises a total savings of \$35 billion over five years. Voters in each county would choose to either eliminate property tax on primary homes and raises the sales tax 2.5 percent, or roll back tax revenues for cities and counties to 2000-01 levels. Budgets could grow with the population. Schools, hospital and health care districts, children’s services districts and fiscally constrained counties would be exempt from the rollback.

The Senate plan promises a total savings of \$12.3 billion over five years. It would roll back property tax revenues for cities and counties to 2005 levels, where they would freeze for one year. After that, budgets could grow with the population. Homeowners could carry the Save Our Homes benefit to new dwellings anywhere in the state. The bill would double the homestead exemption to \$50,000 for first-time home buyers only, and exempt the first \$25,000 of business equipment from a tax on tangible property. Commercial property assessments would be limited to current use, and not highest market value. While there is no exemption for CSCs in the Senate language, only cities and counties are specifically mentioned in the roll back provisions of the bill. FCSC staff will watch this issue very closely.

The Property Tax Conference Committee, which includes members of both the House and Senate, will meet next week to hammer out their differences and a final property tax reform package. The Committee members from the House are Rep. Dean Cannon, Chair (R-Winter Park), Rep. Thad Altman (R-Melbourne), Rep. Frank Attkisson (R-Kissimmee), Rep. Ellyn Bogdanoff (R-Ft. Lauderdale), Rep. Don Brown (R-DeFuniak Springs), Rep. Joyce Cusack (D-DeLand), Rep. Anitere Flores (R-Miami), Rep. Luis Garcia (D-Miami), Rep. Dan Gelber (D-Miami Beach), Rep. Michael Grant (R-Port Charlotte), Rep. Carlos Lopez-Cantera (R-Miami), Rep. Dave Murzin (R-Pensacola), Rep. Michael Scionti (D-Tampa), Rep. Jack Seiler (D-Pompano Beach), and Rep. Will Weatherford (R-Zephyrhills). On the Senate side, the Committee has Sen. Mike Haridopolos, Chair (R-Melbourne), Sen. Jeff Atwater (R-North Palm Beach), Sen. Lisa Carlton (R-Osprey), Sen. Ted Deutch (D-Delray Beach), Sen. Steven Geller (D-Hallandale Beach), Sen. Ronda Storms (R-Brandon), and Sen. Daniel Webster (R-Winter Garden).

Take Action: Please contact members of your delegation on the need to protect children’s services. Those legislators on the Property Tax Conference Committee are particularly important.

Appropriations

The budgeting process continued through this week with joint appropriations conferences beginning April 19. With state revenue expected to fall, the legislature is looking to curtail spending in many areas. Here's how several FCSC legislative issues have fared so far:

- Healthy Kids received another \$18 million in state funds, which combined with the federal match totals \$54.6 million. In addition, the Senate continues \$1 million in funding for outreach and the House provides for \$500,000.
- In the Department of Education's budget, Voluntary Universal Pre-Kindergarten receives the same funding as last year under the House plan, and actually loses \$15.6 million under the Senate plan. However, both budgets provide for a minor base student allocation increase of \$2,011 in the Senate and \$2,055.23 in the House, both with an additional 5 percent for administration.
- Early Steps, in the Department of Health budget, is slated to lose \$3.7 million under the House plan and gain \$100,000 under the Senate plan.
- School Readiness, under the Agency for Workforce Innovation, will lose \$610,000 under the House plan and gain \$190,000 under the Senate plan.
- Independent Living will receive a \$500,000 increase under the Senate plan and a \$1 million increase under the House plan.
- Both the House and Senate provide for a \$3.1 million increase for the Title IV-E Waiver.
- For CBC Equity, the Senate provides for an increase of \$11 million.
- Health Family Expansion - \$2.2 million in new funding is provided in the House.
- Adoption subsidies - \$3.1 million in new funding is provided in the Senate.
- Agency for Persons with Disabilities Deficit - \$149.5 million is provided in the Senate.

QRS

The QRS bill passed unanimously in Senate Pre-K-12 on Thursday, but not without vigorous discussion. Speaking in support of the bill were Sam Bell and Jon Moyle for the CSCs, Chris Duggan, Fely Cuerva and Ted Granger. Speaking in opposition were Larry Keough with the Catholic Conference, Larry Birch representing faith-based centers, and Janet Maybry. Sen. Nan Rich (D-Sunrise) did an excellent job of refuting myths. Committee Chair Sen. Don Gaetz (R-Niceville) was able to keep the bill well-positioned to ensure an appropriate vote.

Children's Cabinet

The Children's Cabinet bills, **HB 509** and **SB 564**, are speedily progressing through the House and Senate. HB 509 was heard in the House Healthcare Council and passed favorably with a 15-0 vote. The bill was removed from its reference to the Council on Policy & Budget and instead fast tracked for placement on the floor calendar to be heard on April 24 for second reading.

In the Senate, the bill passed favorably out of the Health and Human Services Appropriations committee with a 4-0 vote and was also placed on calendar tentatively for its second reading. The bill creates the Children and Youth Cabinet in the Executive Office of the Governor as a coordinating council to ensure that all state agencies and programs that touch the lives of children and youth work in a coordinated and comprehensive manner for the benefit of the children of Florida.

Booster Seats

SB 2048 by Sen. Bill Posey (R-Rockledge) was temporarily postponed when members of the Criminal Justice Committee asked if the bill would require transporters of migrant farm workers to transport children in the beds of pickup trucks in booster seats. Although this request is appalling since children should not be riding in the backs of pickup trucks in the first place, it is still legal and an amendment is being drawn by Sen. Posey to exempt this requirement from the bed of pickup trucks.

Take Action: Please contact Sen. Nancy Argenziano (R-Crystal River) and ask her to approve a withdrawal from the Criminal Justice Committee. Please also contact Sen. Mike Fazano (R-New Port Richey) and ask him to withdraw the bill from the Transportation and Economic Development Appropriations Committee so that the bill may be heard on the Senate floor.

Rights of Children

HB 507, sponsored by Rep. Will Kendrick (R-Carrabelle), has passed from the House and is now in Messages to the Senate. It has changed significantly since our last report and now establishes “standards” for the delivery of child welfare services, including explicit requirements for documentation and participation of foster children and youth in their care. The Senate bill, **SB 2294** by Sen. Nan Rich (D-Sunrise), is still waiting to be heard in Children, Families and Elder Affairs.

Take Action: Please Contact Sen. Ronda Storms (R-Brandon), Chair of Children, Families and Elder Affairs, and ask her to agenda the bill for the last meeting committee meeting on Tuesday, April 24, or waive it out of her committee.

Child Safety

SB 2 by Sen. Mandy Dawson (D-Ft. Lauderdale) changes existing law by making it a second-degree misdemeanor, rather than a non-criminal traffic infraction, if a child is observed to be left unattended in a vehicle for more than fifteen minutes. It also makes it a third-degree felony if a child sustains great bodily harm, permanent disability, or permanent disfigurement. The bill passed the Senate on April 18 by a 37-2 vote and is currently in messages. The House companion, **HB 667** by Rep. Joe Gibbons (D-Hallandale Beach) is currently in the Policy & Budget Council.

Independent Living

SB 2824 establishes a Housing Retention grant program in the Department of Children and Families Office of Homelessness for the purposes of providing grants of up to \$6,000 per year to families or individuals at risk of becoming homeless. The grants include financial assistance for specific expenses and case management. The bill requires that grantees have public-private partnerships and up to 25 percent in matching funds. A similar bill, **HB 1083**, was passed by the House this week. The House version also establishes a pilot program using the Housing First model for children aging out of foster care.

Infant Mortality

HB 1269, sponsored by Rep. Betty Reed (R-Tampa), establishes the Black Infant Health Practice Initiative to be conducted by Healthy Start Coalitions. The initiative will identify factors in the health and social service systems contributing to higher mortality rates among African American infants, and produce recommendations for addressing these factors. The bill was heard in the House Policy and Budget Council on Friday. This bill includes a request for \$1 million in non-recurring funds for grants to two communities (one rural and one urban).

DCF Reorganization

PCS-SB1394, a bill that reorganizes the Department of Children and Families (DCF), aligns districts into regions that conform to judicial circuits and integrates substance abuse and mental health programs into the overall structure and priorities of DCF, was presented to the Senate Committee on Children, Families and Elder Affairs on Thursday, April 19. The bill passed favorably with many advocates praising DCF Secretary Bob Butterworth. The bill moves to Health and Human Services Appropriations on April 24.

S-CHIP

Both the House and Senate passed their budget resolutions, which includes \$50 billion for the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). The \$50 billion, five-year commitment from Congress indicates that it plans to make the reauthorization a high priority. But the debate is far from over.

FCSC and Other News

2007 CSCF Conference Next Month -- Make plans today to attend the 2007 FCSC Conference, which promises to be a very productive and educational event. The conference is scheduled for May 21-23 at the Orlando Omni ChampionsGate Hotel. Reserve your hotel rooms right away as rooms are filling up quickly. The Even though the special room rate cut-off date has passed, be sure to still mention that you are with the CSCF Conference. For details on the conference agenda, registration and hotel information, visit:

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

Speaker Pelosi Announces Children's Summit -- House Speaker Nancy Pelosi will convene a National Summit on America's Children in Washington that will feature national experts and practitioners speaking to legislators about effective strategies for supporting young children and their families in the areas of early childhood development, health, and family income support. The Summit will take place in D.C. on Tuesday, May 22, and will be chaired by Reps. George Miller, Rosa DeLauro, and Chaka Fattah.

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.