



Capitol Connection

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

Week 8

April 27, 2007

2007 Legislative Report for Week of April 23

Appropriations and property tax reform dominated discussions this week amidst a flurry of activity on other bills trying to make their way through the legislative process. Lawmakers this week voted on everything from reptiles to hurricane insurance to voting machines. Still, the focus remained on property tax negotiations and the stalemate between House and Senate members. As of Friday, both sides agreed they would not meet again before establishing ground rules. Negotiations also continued on how to fund next year's tight state budget.

On a bright note, the House KidCare bill passed on the floor, a tremendous achievement toward improving health care coverage for Florida's children. The bill contains several positive streamlining measures and program improvements. With one week left in the regular session, it is imperative that the Senate take up the bill soon in order to make the intended improvements a reality. Also, Thursday marked "Bring Your Child to Work Day," which brought numbers of children to the capitol to learn about what their parents do for a living.

KidCare

HB 7189 by the Healthcare Council and Rep. Bill Galvano (R-Bradenton) passed on the House floor Wed., April 25. The legislation goes a long way toward improving and streamlining the provision of health care coverage for Florida's children. An estimated 500,000 children living in Florida do not have access to health care, and a significant percentage of these children are eligible for KidCare or Medicaid.

The changes outlined in the House bill streamline the program by removing administrative barriers and cumbersome eligibility requirements, making it easier for families to access coverage for their children. The legislation also requires the pediatric standard package of benefits for all children in the program, and provides resources to cover children of state employees and immigrants.

On the Senate side, amendments are being offered and supported by Sen. Mandy Dawson (D-Ft. Lauderdale) and others that will conform the Senate KidCare bill to the recently passed House KidCare bill. These amendments place critical issues that were removed from the bill in the Health and Human Services Committee in a strike-all amendment. They were removed because they cost money. The House has provided most of the money needed to make KidCare a great program again. Urge the Senate to do the same.

It is especially important to support and fund:

- Reinstatement of coverage for the children of immigrants and the children of state employees. The same amount of funding in the House bill should be in the Senate - \$9 million.
- Statewide outreach is critical if legislators' good work on simplifying the program is to reach uninsured families all over the state. There is \$1 million in the budget for outreach, but this will not allow the program to be statewide. The amount should be increased to \$4 million so that families throughout the state can be reached.
- Support families' right to choose an HMO plan or a Medipass doctor no matter where they live.

- Simplify and streamline the eligibility process and the transfer from one program to another is critical. All amendments that accomplish this must be supported.

TAKE ACTION: Please contact House Speaker Rubio and Reps. Bean, Galvano, Ausley, Garcia and Zapata and thank them for their tremendous efforts on HB 7189. Also thank Sen. Dawson for her hard work on SB 930. Urge Senate President Pruitt, and Sens. Peadon Carlton, Lawson, Webster, Rich, Geller, and Crist to take up the KidCare bill quickly (SB 930 or the House version) as both bills contain good streamlining and process fixes.

Property Tax Reform

The Property Tax Conference Committee, which includes members of both the House and Senate, met several times this week to negotiate a property tax reform plan, but the House and Senate remain far apart. On Thursday, the Senate announced it was suspending the property tax reform talks until the two sides establish basic ground rules.

Earlier in the week, the Senate opened the talks with a much smaller tax cut than the House, expecting the two sides to work toward finding a middle ground. Senators offered to increase their cut, and then were stunned when the House responded by moving further away from the middle, pulling the two chambers even farther apart. Senate leadership repeated its position that the House's plan to partially offset deep cuts in property taxes for increased sales taxes must be taken off the table before the talks could continue. Senate Majority Leader Daniel Webster (R-Winter Garden) called the sales tax plan "a regressive tax" and said that the Senate would not raise taxes. Raising the sales tax would take a constitutional amendment and would have to be approved by 60 percent of the voters, which the Senate believes is unlikely.

House leadership stated that any plan is acceptable so long as it meets the House's oft-repeated goal of cutting property taxes by \$1,200 a year for homeowners, \$750 for other residences and \$3,300 for businesses. Senators said cuts that deep, while exempting schools, would amount to an unrealistic 70 percent reduction in revenues for cities and counties.

Gov. Charlie Crist offered his own plan mid-week, which seeks a middle ground by reducing taxes over five years by \$33.5 billion -- in contrast to \$15 billion in the Senate and \$47 billion in the House. The governor's plan includes a 2003 rollback and a growth cap going forward, Save Our Homes portability, a \$25,000 exemption for tangible personal property, doubling the homestead exemption, and a tax break for first-time homeowners.

At this point, the House and Senate plans do not indicate an exemption for Children's Services Councils. The governor's plan is unclear on the CSC exemption at this point. The FCSC Tallahassee advocacy team will continue to closely monitor new developments.

The Property Tax Conference Committee is expected to reconvene next week to try to hammer out a final property tax plan and avoid a special session. Committee members include:

House	Senate
Rep. Dean Cannon, Chair (R-Winter Park)	Sen. Mike Haridopolos, Chair (R-Melbourne)
Rep. Thad Altman (R-Melbourne)	Sen. Jeff Atwater (R-North Palm Beach)
Rep. Frank Attkisson (R-Kissimmee)	Sen. Lisa Carlton (R-Osprey)
Rep. Ellyn Bogdanoff (R-Ft. Lauderdale)	Sen. Ted Deutch (D-Delray Beach)
Rep. Don Brown (R-DeFuniak Springs)	Sen. Steven Geller (D-Hallandale Beach)
Rep. Joyce Cusack (D-DeLand)	Sen. Ronda Storms (R-Brandon)
Rep. Anitere Flores (R-Miami)	Sen. Daniel Webster (R-Winter Garden)
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) Rep. Will Weatherford (R-Zephyrhills)	
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Appropriations

Budget deliberations continued night and day throughout the week, and agreement was reached on a number of priority children’s issues. Other issues have been “bumped up” to the leadership of the Joint Budget Conference Committee, Sen. Lisa Carlton (R-Osprey) and Rep. Ray Sansom (R-Ft. Walton Beach), who met Thurs., April 26. If agreement cannot be reached by Saturday afternoon, then unresolved budget issues will go to the Senate President and Speaker of the House. The Health & Human Services budget has been described as “dismal,” but we continue to work for increases in critical areas.

ISSUE	LAST YEAR	SENATE	HOUSE	STATUS
VUPK (Base Amount)	\$388.1 million (\$2,560 per student)	\$376.03 (\$2,611 per student)	\$376.03 (\$2655.23 per student)	reduction
School Readiness	\$658.5 million			Same as last year
Early Steps	\$5 million (Additional)	\$1.6 million in federal funding authority	\$1.6 million in federal funding authority	Increase in federal
Florida Healthy Kids (AHCA—KidCare)	-\$50.2 million	\$18 million (generates \$54.6 million)	\$18 million (generates \$54.6 million)	Increase of \$32 million requested
KidCare Outreach	\$1 million	\$1 million	\$1 million	Increase to \$4 million requested
Title IV-E		\$3.1 million	\$3.1 million	
CBC Equity (Additional)	\$20 million	\$3 million	\$3 million	
Healthy Start (Additional)	\$6.5 million - earns \$4.5 million federal funds	\$5.6	\$0	Bumped up to leadership
Additional Agency for Persons with Disabilities Deficit		\$114.3 million	\$114.3 million	
Healthy Families Expansion		\$2.2 million	\$2.2 million	
Independent Living (Additional)	\$5 million	\$1 million	\$1 million	
Adoption Promotion/ Maintenance Adoption Subsidies	\$2.3 million	\$0	\$0	Bumped up to leadership
Guardian ad Litem (Additional)	\$8 million	\$0	\$0	

QRS

A great deal of confusion has surrounded the QRS bill, including the myth that it would eliminate the Gold Seal program and that it requires bachelor degreed teachers in the classroom. Opposition was raised in every House committee, but it passed unanimously out of three committees. One of the most important steps toward quality child care is the creation of a uniform statewide voluntary quality rating system. A quality rating system would create a Parent's Guide to child care providing a tool for parents to compare child care centers based on criteria such as curriculum, accreditation, staff qualifications and outcomes. However, due to the level of opposition expressed, it appears the legislation might have to wait until next year. Work will continue with AWI and the stakeholders in the interim. Please call Sen. Nan Rich (D-Sunrise) and Rep. Loranne Ausley (D-Tallahassee) and thank them for their efforts.

Children's Cabinet

The Florida House unanimously passed **HB 509** by Rep. Loranne Ausley (D-Tallahassee) on Wed., April 25, creating the Florida Children's Cabinet. **SB 564** by Sen. Nan Rich (D-Sunrise) was approved unanimously Thurs., April 26. Unfortunately, the requirement for a revenue estimating conference was stricken from the Senate bill. Nonetheless, the Children's Cabinet will bring together all of the agencies serving children to develop and implement a shared vision for improving child and family outcomes. This was the top priority out of the Florida Children's Summit, and it is a very important step for Florida's children, signaling a long-term commitment to address all issues related to children in a holistic manner.

Early Education Funding

One of the most significant barriers to adequate funding in early education is the fact that the programs exist in three different agencies, and therefore three different areas of the budget. On Wed., April 25, the House passed an amendment asking for an independent study by OPPAGA on the issue of consolidating all early education programs into one entity. Hopefully a thorough examination will help guide Gov. Crist and the Legislature to address this issue next legislative session.

Child Welfare

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 the 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), was not heard in Children, Families and Elder Affairs.

Independent Living

SB 2114, sponsored by Sen. Nan Rich (D-Sunrise), is on the Senate Special Order calendar. It limits the liability of a caseworker who signs an application for driver's license for a minor who is in foster care; revises eligibility criteria for independent living transition services and for Road-to-Independence Program; increases age limit for eligibility for certain persons to qualify for medical assistance payments; and provides for removal of disabilities of certain minors for purposes of securing depository financial services, etc. The House bill, **HB 1215** by Rep. Rich Glorioso (R-Plant City) is on the House calendar.

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 15 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) was pulled from the Policy & Budget Council and is on the House calendar.

The booster seat bills have stalled as **SB 2048** by Sen. Bill Posey (R-Rockledge) has not been formally withdrawn from the Senate Criminal Justice Committee or the Transportation and Economic Development Appropriations Committee in the Senate and **HB 443** by Rep. Thad Altman (R-Melbourne) has not been withdrawn from the Policy and Budget Council in the House even though the bill sponsors have requested that they be withdrawn from the last committees of reference.

TAKE ACTION: Please call Senate President Pruitt and House Speaker Rubio and ask them to assist in getting the bills placed on special order so that they can be heard on the floor early next week.

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 room soon, as rooms are filling up quickly. While 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>

Free Movie Screening - "Collateral Damage" -- Digital journalist Julie Winokar joins a local panel discussion Wed., May 9, at 3:00 p.m. at the University of Miami Mailman Center Auditorium to share insights on her film that captures a gripping account of when health care access became a matter of life or death. Dr. Joan Alker, of Georgetown University, discusses her recent study of Florida Medicaid pilots in Broward and Duval counties, and the potential changes and implications for health care in Florida. For information, call (305) 571-5700 ext. 508 or [Click Here](#) to download flyer.

CSC of Broward Honored with Impact Award -- On April 26, at its annual Philanthropy Conference, the Donor's Forum of South Florida presented the Children's Services Council of Broward County with the 2007 *Impact Award* for most effective community project in the \$500,000+ range. The award, shared with other funders of the Broward Transitional Independent Living Initiative (Community Foundation of Broward, Jim Moran Foundation, Junior League of Greater Ft. Lauderdale and United Way of Broward County), recognized the collaborative efforts of the funding partners to create a coordinated system of care to improve outcomes for youth transitioning from foster and relative care to self-sufficiency.

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.