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Abbott Names CPS/Foster Care Reform as Emergency Priorities; Schwertner Wastes No Time Getting to Work

Schwertner calls immediate hearing on Senate Bill 11 as Governor Abbott designates child protection issues an emergency priority during his State of the State address.

AUSTIN, TX -- During today's State of the State address, Texas Governor Greg Abbott named issues related to foster care and child protective services to a list of emergency legislative priorities he hopes to see addressed during the 85th Legislative Session. This emergency designation allows lawmakers to act on legislation to improve the state's child protection efforts within the first 60 days of session.

In response to the Governor's declaration, Senator Charles Schwertner (R-Georgetown) wasted no time in calling a hearing of the Senate Committee on Health and Human Services for this Thursday, February 2 at 1:00 pm (Texas Capitol, room E1.028).

"It's hard to imagine a more critical priority than safeguarding our state's most vulnerable children from abuse and neglect," said Schwertner. "These are serious challenges that demand our undivided attention and issues that deserve to be placed at the forefront of the 85th Legislative Session. I sincerely thank Governor Abbott for his attention to this issue, and for allowing us to begin work on protecting the lives of Texas children without delay."

During Thursday's hearing, the Senate Committee on Health and Human Services is expected to receive testimony on issues related to child protection and formally consider action on Senate Bill 11, an omnibus reform package aimed at making critical improvements to both Child Protective Services (CPS) and the state foster care system. Senate Bill 11 was previously named a top priority of Lt. Governor Dan Patrick.

The main provisions of Senate Bill 11 are outlined below:

Ensures timely and appropriate services for children in foster care.

- Requires the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) to work with the foster care managed care organization (STAR Health contractor) to implement a triage assessment system to help caseworkers identify high needs children and expedite appropriate services within 3-5 days of removal from the home.
- Requires Child Placing Agencies (CPAs) and STAR Health to ensure that 90% of children receive a comprehensive assessment within their first 30 days in foster care.
- Establishes a regional pilot program for a non-profit organization to provide comprehensive case management services for foster children with the most acute medical and behavioral health needs.

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Increases the capacity of the foster care system by encouraging collaboration and enhancing Foster Care Redesign.

- Requires local CPS leadership to analyze DFPS data on capacity needs and work with foster care providers, faith-based communities, and advocate groups to develop comprehensive plans for increasing foster care capacity.
- Requires all future Foster Care Redesign contractors to be non-profit entities with a mission related to child welfare.
- Requires the development of a comprehensive readiness review prior to expanding Foster Care Redesign to new catchment areas, including assessment of a vendor's ability to provide high-quality case management and evidence-based services to children and families, as well as their ability to ensure sufficient foster care capacity.

Increases accountability for providers serving children in the CPS system.

- Implements a regional pilot program in two areas of the state that enlist a non-profit vendor to assume responsibility for the provision of Family-Based Safety Services (FBSS) and case management for children and families.
- Directs DFPS to work with outside groups to develop a series of quality metrics for both FBSS and post-adoptive services for inclusion in future provider contracts.
- Creates the Foster Care Oversight and Quality Assurance Division within DFPS to manage contract compliance and oversee performance outcomes for all foster care contractors responsible for providing services to children and families.
- Expands the current performance-based contracting program to include all foster care providers and directs DFPS to implement a system of financial incentives for meeting or exceeding established benchmarks, as well as penalties for substandard performance.

Strengthens the standards for investigating abuse or neglect of children in foster care and moves these investigations to the CPS Investigations Division.

- Moves investigations of child abuse and neglect that occur at residential child care facilities such as foster homes, residential treatment centers, and foster group homes to the CPS Investigations division and ensures that all investigations are held to a high standard. This includes 24-hour and 72-hour requirements for initial face-to-face contact with victims as opposed to the current 5-day standard.

A medical doctor by training, Dr. Schwertner serves as Chairman of the Senate Committee on Health and Human Services. Schwertner is currently serving his third term as the senator for Senate District 5, a ten-county region of central and east Texas.

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