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Legislature

Legislators propose improvements to 'porous' child welfare system

BY MARY ELLEN KLAS

After a year of damaging news reports about child deaths from abuse and neglect, a Florida Senate committee on Tuesday passed a package of proposals intended improve the quality and quantity of regulation over the state's child welfare system.

The wide-ranging bills proposed by the Senate Children, Families and Elder Affairs Committee are intended to improve what Senate President Don Gaetz called "a porous system" that has led to hundreds of child deaths under the state's watch.

"We need to professionalize and make more effective our approach to child welfare in the state and then plug the side doors and the holes and windows, which I think make for a system that's way too porous," Gaetz told reporters Tuesday.

Under the proposals, the state Department of Children and Families would be required to increase the educational expertise of the child abuse investigators, create a website to report basic facts about child deaths reported to the child abuse hotline and mobilize a trained team to analyze the cause of deaths.

The bills would also increase the coordination of children deemed "medically complex" and require the state to place many of these children — who are now housed in a small number of nursing homes — in medical foster homes when possible.

"Back in the summer, we were all shocked and concerned about child abuse deaths brought to our attention by the Miami Herald newspaper," said Sen. Eleanor Sobel, D-Hollywood, chairman of the committee. "We've identified several problems and our bills contain recommended solutions."

Gaetz said that the bills will also require “tens of millions more in recurring funding” but did not say how much the Legislature’s proposed budget will include. Gov. Rick Scott has proposed adding \$42 million for additional child protective investigators and another \$8 million for sheriff’s investigations.

“Oftentimes you get what you pay for and I think in child welfare we have gone on the cheap and I think that’s been a mistake,” Gaetz said.

A key element of the Senate plan is to increase the professional expertise of the child abuse investigators working for the agency by requiring that 80 percent of them have a college degree in social work. The program would grandfather in existing employees and offer some of them tuition exemptions or up to \$3,000 a year in loan payments if they choose to pursue a social work degree.

“We send firefighters to fight fires. We need to send social workers to address social problems,” Sobel said.

Another portion of the bill directs DCF to keep siblings together when placed into foster case.

Howard Talenfeld, a children’s rights advocate and president of Florida’s Children First, called the bill “a good first step” but he said investigations should extend beyond the current 60-day limit. He urged the committee to refine the bill to extend the time in which the investigation can occur and allow case workers to implement a safety plan when there is a chance for future crisis.

“After 60 days, it’s over,” he said. “There’s no one watching the children. There’s no one watching the family and someone is waiting for the next shoe to fall.”

The House child welfare reform plan, said Talenfeld, includes a provision that extends the 60-day review and allows for expanded child safety plans.

Talenfeld urged the committee to also address child on child sexual abuse, which contributed to the 2009 suicide of Gabriel Myers, a 7-year-old who hanged himself in a Broward foster home after years of sexual abuse.