



Testimony on SB 1646
April 14, 2009

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Nelson and committee members:

My name is Christine Gendron and I am the Policy Coordinator for the Texas Network of Youth Services, a nonprofit association of organizations that serve at-risk youth. I am here to support SB 1646, which would create a Council on Children and Families. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

We believe a Council on Children and Families would be advantageous to Texas for several reasons. First, many youth have needs that require services from multiple state agencies and the high-level coordination of those services could facilitate a more integrated, convenient system, as well as lead to the identification of gaps in services. Second, interagency coordination has been proven to be an effective way to streamline service delivery and maximize the efficiency of state dollars. Coordination encourages the blending and braiding of funds and also makes it possible to identify the duplication of services.

We think these benefits alone are more than enough to justify the creation of an interagency council, and for that reason we support this bill, even if it remains in its current form. I would like to respectfully ask you to consider charging the council with an additional function though, and that is strategic planning on preventing Texas children and youth from entering foster care, the juvenile justice system, and other health and human services systems in the first place. In other words, in addition to improving service delivery, we would like to see the council do strategic planning on improving outcomes for Texas children and youth, and we would like that strategic planning to be reflected in its LAR.

I know that you are a strong advocate for prevention services, Chairwoman Nelson, as are quite a few of the other members of your committee, so I'm not going to spend time making a case for prevention. Instead, I just want to point out that the factors that impact child well-being and outcomes are all heavily intertwined. For instance, the Department of Family and Protective Services is responsible for children who have been victimized by abuse and neglect, yet two significant risk factors for abuse and neglect are domestic violence and substance abuse, issues that are addressed by other agencies. Our two juvenile justice agencies are charged with handling youth who break the law, yet we know that a large percentage of delinquent youth face mental health challenges

or have learning disabilities. In fact, because the same risk factors can lead to so many different outcomes, it is sometimes hard to know what you are specifically preventing through prevention services. In other words, a youth development program could be preventing delinquency, school drop-out, or teen pregnancy, depending on the individual youth, and that makes it very difficult to evaluate programs in our current system, since many of these issues are in their own silos.

As this bill is currently written, the council would improve the coordination of the prevention services that are currently offered by state agencies, just like it would improve the delivery of other services that are offered. We would like to see it also call on agencies to do planning on a broader scale however, and craft a vision and LAR related to increasing the overall health and well-being of the families, youth, and children in this state. The agency leaders we have talked with understand the importance of prevention, but they do not often have the luxury of prioritizing it in their LAR's because the mandates of their individual agencies are to serve youth who already have severe and immediate needs. An interagency council is the perfect opportunity to prioritize prevention, because it would remove agency leaders from their silos and pool their expertise.

In addition, one other suggestion we would like to make for the council is the inclusion of a leader from the Child Support Division of the OAG. In addition to collecting child support, the division houses an Office of Family Initiatives that coordinates programs to prevent teen pregnancy, engage dads in their children's lives, and help parents who are no longer romantically involved work together to support their kids. We believe they could offer an invaluable perspective to improving outcomes for Texas children and families.

Thank you.

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