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News & Media

Sweeping changes in store for Florida's child welfare system

The most sweeping change to Florida's child welfare laws in more than a decade cleared both house and senate earlier this month and is expected to be signed into law by Governor Rick Scott.

Senate Bill 1666, a comprehensive child-welfare reform package, adds more than \$46 million to child-welfare services including a \$10 million carve out for the state's 19 Community Based Care organizations, such as Devereux Community Based Care.

"We worked very hard for additional funding," Devereux CBC Chief Executive Officer Carol Deloach said. "The initial ask was for \$26.5 million, but this is the first increase Community Based Care has received in years, so we're happy for it."

The bill largely is considered bipartisan and was driven by political outrage over a Miami Herald series that chronicled the deaths of more than 400 children known to the state Department of Children and Families.

It makes numerous changes to laws and programs intended to protect children from abuse and neglect. Specifically, it requires the Department of Children and Families to conduct immediate investigations into deaths and other significant incidents involving children known to the department, prioritizes efforts to keep siblings together, reimburses nonrelatives who volunteer to care for children in the dependency system and "cleans up" language in current law relating to community based care.

Other changes outlined in the bill require the department to post basic information about child deaths to its website, extend the requirement of the Rilya Wilson Act that children in the child-welfare system attend preschool to those children under the age of three, establish a preference for hiring social workers as protective investigators and dependency case managers and establish the Florida Institute for Child Welfare – a consortium of public and private university schools of social work that can advise the state on child-welfare policy, social work education and training.

If signed by the governor, changes will take effect July 1.

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May 15, 2014

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