

## **Privatize protective services? Let's not**

The Texas House has just passed legislation to have private corporations take over the job of ensuring the safety of our abused children and getting them into permanent homes. The proposed legislation calls for firing about 1,700 Child Protective Services caseworkers.

The complex work these CPS employees do goes under the bureaucratic name “case management,” and includes prosecuting the legal case, making difficult decisions about where children should live, and coordinating services to children and families.

Private corporations already provide foster care and services such as parenting classes. Under the House plan, however, whenever a court names the state the custodian of an abused child, the state would actually put a private corporation in charge of prosecuting the court case from that point forward and making profound decisions about the child.

Basically, the state system would be decentralized with control vested in various private boards of directors running corporations under contract to the state to provide child protection in certain geographic areas.

Some Texans have more confidence in public systems and others more confidence in private systems, but most Texans keep a wary eye on both and know that some things are better done by the public sector and others by the private sector. For example, remember when private prisons were going to solve all our problems?

Suppose the Children's Division of Enron is awarded the contract for Tarrant County. Do you want it deciding whether the state will recommend to the court that Johnny go home or with Grandma or into a private foster home? Do we want the Children's Division of Enron arguing on behalf of the State of Texas whether a parent's rights should be terminated? If a parent's rights are terminated, do we want the Children's

Division of Enron deciding whether Johnny is adopted by this family or that family or grows up in this foster home or that foster home?

Maybe you would say yes if it would save tax dollars, but don't jump to the conclusion that it would. Both the state and private providers are already saying it will cost as much or maybe more for the private sector to provide case management. In fact, experience in other states is that privatizing case management doesn't save money.

To begin with, there is no competitive market for case management. Indeed, if the state were to privatize case management, it would be buying a service that no private corporation in Texas currently has the ability to provide. Start-up costs would be significant. For example, private corporations have no staff whatsoever trained for case management.

The few private corporations that might be able to win a state contract would in essence have monopoly power. Of course, once we have dismantled our public system, when it comes time to renew the private contract, the providers will have us over a barrel in negotiating a price, even if they've done a bad job.

You certainly shouldn't jump to the conclusion that private corporations can provide better case management. Experience in other states is decidedly mixed. Just like charter schools, some private providers may be excellent, while some will run off with our money and dump our kids. With the public system we at least get strong financial controls and certain minimum standards.

When our public system fails, and at times it does, it is not because it is public, but because it is underfunded. Texas spends 60% less than the national average and 40% less than the Southern-states average on child protection. Nothing about privatizing case management addresses the real problems we have with child protection such as a lack of mental health services and drug treatment.

Fortunately, the Senate is maintaining healthy skepticism about privatization of case management. It prudently passed legislation to pilot privatization in a limited area and to evaluate the outcome before proceeding statewide.

The private corporations seeking these contracts are dead set against a pilot program, and are pinning their hopes on the House plan to merely “roll it out.” Their very opposition to testing the idea of privatization should tell you something about its wisdom. Just ask yourself this: Does a smart cowboy buy a pick-up truck that the seller insists can’t be test driven?

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