

F. Scott McCown CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY PRIORITIES

Preserve the safe house Bush built for children

Then-Gov. George W. Bush championed abused children, reforming laws and increasing funding for child protection. Everything he did for children, however, the 78th Legislature under Gov. Rick Perry will undo unless they fund Child Protective Services.

Bush created the Committee to Promote Adoption, which concluded that the state was neglecting children in foster care instead of moving them to permanent homes. Using this finding, Bush in 1997 convinced the Legislature to require courts and CPS to move foster children back to their own homes or to adoptive homes within a year.

Bush did not stop there. After studying CPS' budget, he convinced the Legislature in 1999 to increase funding by \$204 million, which included 380 more front-line caseworkers, a 7 percent foster care rate increase and increased prevention funding.

Now, caught between our children's needs and talk of no new taxes, the Legislature is considering cutting 240 CPS staff. Perry's administration admits: "A decrease of 240 (workers) directly impacts the safety and well being of children."

"Caseloads . . . would increase," and investigations would "be compromised." Children might "experience repeated abuses."

As a judge, I learned how a shortage of CPS investigators results in repeated abuses. One 14-year old girl comes painfully to mind. Her mother was dead. Her father had driven off her stepmother by domestic violence. Then he turned to his daughter. He kept her home from school to work, and he beat her regularly. Someone called CPS

repeatedly. CPS finally removed her and brought a case against her father. In chambers, she and I talked about her new school and foster home. Then I asked if she had any questions. Her eyes filled with tears as she whispered, "Yes. Why did it take you so long to come and get me?"

It took so long because CPS had so few investigators. Through Bush's increased funding, however, CPS was able to remove dramatically more children from abusive homes. In 1998, before the increased funding, CPS removed 6,917 abused children. In 2002, with the increased funding, CPS removed 11,309. Bush also increased money for services to families, such as substance abuse treatment, so CPS could leave children safely home with services or return children safely home after services. The Legislature is considering cutting services by more than \$53 million. Perry's administration admits that by reducing services more children will have to be removed from their homes and fewer will be able to return home.

Consequently, CPS will need more homes; yet the Legislature is considering cutting foster care and adoption subsidies by an astounding 25 percent, the amount paid a decade ago. It means a loss to foster parents and treatment centers of more than \$100 million a year in state and federal funds. Perry's administration concedes that the cut will force some foster homes and treatment centers to close. CPS already has too few safe places for children, and with these cuts will soon have even fewer.

By cutting adoption subsidies, Perry's administration admits it will complete fewer adoptions. More than

3,700 children are free for adoption and awaiting a family. Without an adequate adoption subsidy, many families just cannot consider parenting these children, many of whom have special needs or are part of a sibling group.

As a judge, I learned about the lives of despair led by these waiting children. One 8-year old boy sat in my chambers with clenched fists and tears streaming down his cheeks as he told me: "My life sucks, and it will always suck." Forget about child abuse prevention. Of the state's 17 prevention programs, under the proposed budget the state will fund only three, reduced by 16 percent.

If the state could safely cut the CPS budget, Bush would not have called for increased funding. Republican administrations have controlled CPS for more than six years and have submitted three consecutive biennial budgets. After the Legislature approved the present budget, Perry did not veto a single cent. How could they think they could safely cut CPS now?

Yet, they are dispassionately discussing cutting \$53 million state dollars from the present budget and denying an additional \$55 million needed essentially to tread water, thereby giving up more than \$90 million in matching federal dollars. The \$108 million in state dollars CPS needs would cost each Texas family \$8 a year. If you want to preserve the safe house that George W. Bush built for Texas children, please let Perry and the Legislature know that you are willing to pay your \$8, even if it means more taxes.

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