

The Quorum Report

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TPPF & CONSERVATIVE COALITION CONFERENCE CONSIDERS RANGE OF FAMILY ISSUES

... from Child Protective Services to impacts of families

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst today called for a thorough and immediate legislative review of *Child Protective Services*, including an emergency hearing by the *Senate Health and Human Services Committee* within the next ten days.

Speaking at a conference titled *Texas Families First*, Dewhurst said 162,000 Texas children suffer from abuse or neglect each year. He said he was shocked and outraged to learn last week that more than 500 Texas children had died of abuse or neglect in the last two and a half years. One quarter of these children came from families that had previously been investigated by CPS.

Dewhurst said it might be necessary to privatize foster homes managed by the state. He also wanted to know if there was a conflict of interest in having CPS perform the dual role of investigator and caseworker and questioned whether, as child abuse was a 2nd degree felony, law enforcement rather than social workers should be investigating potential violations of state law.

Dewhurst told reporters afterwards that he might ask **Gov. Rick Perry** to make CPS overhaul an emergency issue for the next legislative session. The *Texas Conservative Coalition Research Institute* and the *Texas Public Policy Foundation* organized the two-day conference. Perry gives the luncheon address Friday.

"When one child dies of abuse or neglect, we're sad. We're mad," Dewhurst said. "When 500 die of abuse or neglect, the system is obviously broken. It's outrageous. It's heartbreaking. It's unacceptable. And we must fix it."

Dewhurst said a rash of child abuse reports in the media recently had highlighted weaknesses in the state's protective system. He highlighted a case of three sisters being sexually abused in Hidalgo County that came to light in July. Authorities had been warned several times. He also spoke about the death of a two-year-old in Dallas last week that was caused by malnourishment. The child had been visited seven times by CPS.

"Experience tells us that these lives, maimed or destroyed, are only the tip of the iceberg," Dewhurst said. "Like the dime-sized lump of a cancer, swelling beneath the skin, the abuses that have surfaced are symptomatic of a much larger problem."

Dewhurst said CPS investigates over 278,000 children per year but only removes one percent of the children from the home. He said he wanted to know if there was a better way of gauging when a child was at risk.

Dewhurst said he also wanted to know if caseworkers could be better trained. He said there was no reason why it should take an average of 75 days to investigate an abuse report. Dewhurst said caseworker turnover was too high, caused in part by emotional burnout.

"I don't see how this can be done without adding more resources. But that alone is not the answer. There's no silver bullet," Dewhurst told reporters, after his speech. "Until we look at the whole system, from top to bottom, we're not going to know all of the answers to the problem. One of which is clearly the fact that our caseworkers aren't following a policy."

Dewhurst said he had every confidence in *Health and Human Services Commissioner Albert Hawkins* and HHS *Inspector General Brian Flood*, who, at Perry's request, is carrying out a statewide investigation of CPS.

At an earlier panel at the conference, **Gregg Phillips**, former deputy executive director for social services, said hiring more and more caseworkers would not solve the underlying cause of child abuse and neglect. The panel's theme was the *State of the Family*.

Phillips said conservatives spent too much time playing defense to groups like the *Center for Public Policy Priorities* that call for more funding for *Medicaid* and *CHIP*.

"What's going to happen is that they are going to take more and more and more money to feed the Medicaid beast," Phillips said. "We've got to spend more of our time, more of our effort, more of our money supporting families, supporting marriage, supporting the links between faith and marriage."

If not, Phillips warned, Texans would be "stunned" to learn that, within the next six to ten years, more money was being spent on Medicaid than education.

State Demographer **Steve Murdock** told the conference that, unlike other parts of the country, Texas was seeing an increase in family households. He attributed some of this to an increase in the Hispanic population.

Murdock said that in 2000 the average income for a married family was \$50,000. For a family where a female was head of the household it was \$23,500. Murdock said 7.5 percent of married families were in poverty, compared to 28 percent of families where a female was head of the household.

"It's important to understand just how much household composition impacts income, tax revenue and public costs," Murdock said.

Heritage Foundation Fellow Patrick Fagan said the intact married family was a huge national resource, because it "contributes the most and demands the least." Noting the demographic changes impacting Texas, Fagan said Hispanics were "disposed towards marriage culturally and are high-worship." He said Texas had to "culturally and politically support the intact, married, religious worshipping families across all faiths."

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