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Herald - Republican

Children's mental health plan survives the heat

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INDIANAPOLIS - A controversial state plan that legislates comprehensive mental health services for Indiana's children survived opponents' heated pleas to can the idea and was conditionally approved Wednesday by the Indiana Commission on Mental Health.

The Children's Social, Emotional & Behavioral Health Plan was part of Senate Enrolled Act 529, a 2005 law that reorganized the way the state delivers and administers all facets of children's services.

However, the plan has only recently made the news because it wasn't written until after the law passed. After working on it a year, a task force headed by the Department of Education presented a draft of it June 1. The DOE amended the draft in August, and the Mental Health Commission has spent four meetings reviewing it since.

The commission's first meeting was filled with opponents to the plan, most of whom said they feared that it will take away parents' rights in making health care decisions for their children.

The past two meetings were fairly quiet; Wednesday's meeting brought out 30 onlookers at the Statehouse, with newspaper and TV coverage, and impassioned speeches from both opponents and supporters of the plan.

Two high-profile figures who addressed the commission were Monica Boyer, a Warsaw daycare provider who also is president of the Indiana

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Childcare Association, and Joseph Venable, president of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, Indiana.

Boyer spoke against the plan; Venable spoke for it.

"Since this bill was brought to my attention last year, I have been carefully researching mental health screening for children in Indiana, as well as across the United States, paying particular attention to children ages 0 to 5," Boyer said. "My concern about government involvement in mental health screening of our children is taking the power of a parent's right to make choices and supervise their child's social and emotional well-being and giving this power to state agencies with little regard to the family."

Venable, on the other hand, said the nation and Indiana have a real problem of undetected mental illness, and that this plan can help children with serious mental illness get help.

"This is a very, very important issue, and I hope you will vote positively on it," Venable said.

An Indianapolis psychiatrist with a doctorate in education and a concerned grandfather also spoke against the plan. A parent of three children with diagnosed mental illnesses spoke in favor of it.

During commission discussion, it became apparent that the commission was divided on how the plan should be worded, finalized and adopted, with commission chairwoman state Rep. Cindy Noe, R-Indianapolis, clearly in favor of allowing the Legislature a second look at the plan before it becomes final.

She first proposed taking out of the legislation the word "shall" and replacing it with "may" in the section that mandates mental health testing for all Indiana children. The rest of the commission killed that idea, however. Commission members also rallied against Noe's proposal for a legislative amendment that would have added a year to the plan's final adoption.

At one point, it appeared as if the meeting had ended in chaos, with commission members suddenly getting up out of their chairs, walking around the meeting table and huddling together in groups of three or four, talking in low tones about the plan's wording.

At least two media people left, thinking the meeting was over when, as suddenly as it started, the spontaneous "caucus" ended and all but two commission members - who apparently had gone home - returned to their seats.

Back in session, Noe said that some commission members were proposing to accept the mental health plan as presented, with certain caveats. Those conditions included stating that the commission accepted the concepts of the plan; that it did not recommend universal mental health screening for all Indiana children (even though the law mandates it with the word "shall"); and that, as the DOE developed the plan's rules, the commission would be available as an advisory group to the DOE.

That proposal passed 11-1, with only Noe voting against it, and the meeting closed.

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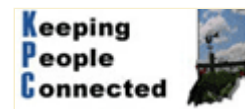
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