

Senate Judiciary Takes Testimony On Juvenile Reform Package

The Senate Judiciary Committee today took testimony on a 26-bill package reforming the juvenile justice system, hearing statements both applauding the bills and criticizing them for their emphasis on punishment.

Arlin NESS, president of Star Commonwealth and representing the Michigan Federation of Family and Child Agencies, said putting more resources into prevention and treatment decreases costs long term.

Ness said, although reform is needed in juvenile justice, the package needlessly throws some children into the adult criminal justice system. He quoted a southern legislator who said building more prisons to solve the problem of violence is like digging more grave sites to solve AIDS. Solely increasing punishment for juveniles will not solve the problem, he said.

"Just locking them into the adult system is not going to change them," Ness said. Sens. Jon CISKY (R-Saginaw) and Mike ROGERS (R-Howell), both ex-law enforcement officials, said hard-core juvenile offenders need to be removed from society for the protection of its citizens.

"We have a certain number of people we can do very little with," Cisky said about reforming juvenile offenders. "Having been on the streets and having guns pulled on us, it's a reality check." Rogers agreed.

"We're dealing with people who are not children; these are cold-blooded criminals," Rogers said about minors who commit major crimes.

Linda CLARK, victims' rights advocate, said a person is just as much a victim whether the criminal is a minor or an adult.

"We as a society are unwilling to stigmatize a juvenile, so we allow juveniles to stigmatize society," Clark said. "A clear message must be sent that we won't tolerate these (unlawful) actions."

Dr. Paul WEIKERT, representing the Juvenile Justice Prevention Task Force, said legislation holding parents responsible for the actions of their children is a step in the right direction.

"I think parents have to be held accountable because some parents are negligent in raising their kids," he said.

However, Weikert also said financial incentives should be provided for probate courts to set up programs giving parents -- lacking in the tools needed to raise their children -- the opportunity to learn how to cope. He said a model should be created to help evaluate families of children committing minor offenses who may need assistance.

Ed CRUZAN, an attorney from White Cloud who specializes in defending juveniles, said the section of the package giving prosecutors more control over whether a minor should be tried in an adult court tips the balance too far to one side.

"The key to the present system is that an objective judge decides," Cruzan said. "This is a very dangerous change. This will put the power of the future of the child squarely in the hands of the prosecutor."

The committee plans to take up the legislation again in two weeks.

Lead Bidder For Executive Life Business Selected

Insurance Commissioner D. Joseph OLSON announced today that CNA Life has been selected as the lead bidder for the inforce Michigan block of business of Executive Life Insurance Company, currently in liquidation.

"Thousands of Michigan policyholders should soon be finding a safe harbor with CNA Life after years of uncertainty following the insolvency of Executive Life," Olson said. "CNA Life was the financially strongest company of the six bidders."

The Michigan business of Executive Life was placed into liquidation in 1991, and has since been administered by the Michigan Life & Health Insurance Guaranty Association.

"The financial strength of the bidders was a key factor in the selection of the lead bidder," Olson explained. "While CNA Life's bid of \$73 million was only \$2 million higher than the lowest bidder, CNA Life has assets of \$1,054 million and high ratings from the three major insurance company rating organizations. The lowest bidder has assets of only \$11 million and no ratings."

The outstanding policies will become fully the policies of CNA Life.