



NEWS RELEASE

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**Health and Human Services Committee Hears Senate Bill 830
Strengthening Accountability for Children and Youth in Foster Care**
*Texas CASA and One Voice Texas Champion Bill to Create Ombudsman Position for
Children and Youth in Foster Care*

AUSTIN, TX (April 29, 2015) – Earlier today, the Texas Senate Health and Human Services Committee heard testimony in support of the Committee Substitute for Senate Bill 830, which was the result of a collaborative effort between child welfare advocates, the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) and the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC). This legislation would create an ombudsman for children and youth in foster care housed within the HHSC’s Ombudsman’s Office.

Based on recommendations from former foster youth and authored by Senator Lois Kolkhorst (R-Brenham), the bill would empower children and youth in state care to report concerns about their placements and rights violations, ensuring these issues are addressed with the highest level of transparency and accountability.

“While the Office of Consumer Affairs will continue to be part of the Department, the ombudsman position will be staffed by one dedicated full-time employee housed within the HHSC, creating an independent resource for foster youth,” said Senator Lois Kolkhorst. “In addition, by establishing protocols to prevent retaliation and extending protections for confidentiality, young people in the foster care system will have a neutral outlet to raise concerns about the care they receive.”

During the Sunset Commission review process, many former foster youth relayed emotional and tragic stories to the Texas Legislature about how their rights were violated while in state care, highlighting challenges about the current ombudsman office within DFPS, which is tasked with investigating incidents of rights violations, including physical and sexual abuse and neglect within the foster care system. Not only do youth not know what to do or whom to tell, but they often distrust the staff that placed them in a home where they were mistreated, have a perception that nothing will be done based on previous unaddressed concerns or are fearful of retaliation.

This legislation would require DFPS and HHSC to continue to work together to develop policies regarding retaliation protection for reporters, including consequences for individuals, organizations and/or agencies that engage in this behavior; establish specific protocols for handling calls from children and youth in foster care; support consumer knowledge of the role of this position by requiring a yearly outreach plan; and increase the value of information the ombudsman receives by requiring yearly reporting of data and trends to the legislature and the general public.

“Senator Kolkhorst’s resolute support since the legislation’s inception has been essential to advancing this bill,” said Sarah Crockett, Texas CASA Public Policy Coordinator. “She has consistently listened to the many powerful voices, including former foster youth and other child welfare advocates, who have spoken up during the 84th Legislative Session about how critical an ombudsman is for children and youth in the child welfare system.”

Championed by Texas CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) and One Voice Texas, SB 830 will ensure that DFPS will best serve the needs of the foster youth population. Establishing an ombudsman position at HHSC will allow the ombudsman to speak and act on behalf of children and youth regarding their care, placement and services.

About Texas CASA

Austin-based Texas CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) is the statewide association of 71 local CASA programs that recruit and train volunteers to advocate for children in the child welfare system. In 2014, 8,066 well-trained volunteers served 24,742 children in 207 of the 254 Texas counties. Texas CASA supports the local CASA programs by providing funding, training and technical assistance to program staff, board and volunteers.

CASA volunteers are everyday members of the community doing extraordinary work by choosing to speak up for abused and neglected children in their communities. They are screened and trained, then appointed by the court to advocate for the best interests of a child or sibling group in the foster care system. Often the CASA volunteer is the one constant in a child's life while he or she goes through the overburdened foster care system. CASA volunteers work to move the children through foster care and into safe, permanent homes as quickly as possible.

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About the One Voice Texas

One Voice Texas is a 501(c)3 collaborative of public, private and non-profit health and human services organizations in the Greater Houston/Harris County and surrounding areas that utilizes education/awareness programs, program development, and advocacy to ensure the health and human service needs of all Texans are addressed in legislative, regulatory, funding and other public policy initiatives.

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