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BILL ANALYSIS

Senate Fiscal Agency

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House Bill 4097 (Substitute S-1 as reported)
Sponsor: Representative Bill Martin
House Committee: Judiciary
Senate Committee: Criminal Justice and Urban Affairs

Date Completed: 4-26-89

RATIONALE

Many communities have neighborhood programs that identify homes in which children can find help or safety in an emergency. Such homes generally display a distinctive sign in the window. These "safe house" programs commonly are promoted in local schools in cooperation with local law enforcement agencies. Community Child Watch, Helping Hand, and the McGruff House programs are among the better known programs. The current programs, however, have been criticized for lack of uniformity. Due to the existence of various programs across the State, a child who is visiting from out of town or who recently moved to a new neighborhood could be unfamiliar with the sign used by the local program and fail to recognize a safe house in an emergency. Some feel that a uniform statewide program and symbol should be designated for safe house programs.

CONTENT

The bill would create a new Act to establish a "McGruff/child watch house" program and designate a standard symbol for the program.

The State Police, in cooperation with the Michigan Sheriffs' Association, the Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police, the crime prevention association, and the child watch association would have to do all of the following:

- Develop guidelines for the establishment and operation of McGruff house/child watch programs.
- Design or adopt a standard symbol and sign to be used by a designated McGruff/child watch house.
- Develop or adopt a model application form for designation of a home as a McGruff/child watch house.
- Make available to nonprofit organizations, school districts, business entities, and local law enforcement agencies information pertaining to the program.
- Publicize the program "in as many ways as is reasonably practical".
- Cooperate in conducting background checks on applicants for designation as McGruff/child watch houses.

The sign designating program houses could not be easily reproduced and would have to be easily seen from a distance. Signs would have to be numbered and made available at cost to local law enforcement agencies that sponsored or cooperated with a sponsor of a program.

A local law enforcement agency, or a school district, business entity, or nonprofit organization in cooperation with such an agency could sponsor a McGruff/child watch house program. A program sponsor would have to supply the numbered sign that bore the standard symbol to applicants, if the applicant agreed in writing to follow the terms of the

program, and the applicant and any other adult who resided in the applicant's home passed a background check, including a criminal history check, conducted by a local law enforcement agency. A sponsor would have to keep a register of houses within the program.

A person whose house was not an approved McGruff/child watch house would be prohibited from displaying any sign that bore the standard symbol so that it was visible from outside the house. Program signs would be the property of the local law enforcement agency that sponsored or cooperated in the sponsorship of the program. If the sponsor determined that a person's approved home no longer qualified for the program, the person would have to return the sign to the local law enforcement agency.

A person who violated the bill would be guilty of a misdemeanor.

SENATE COMMITTEE ACTION

The Senate Committee on Criminal Justice and Urban Affairs adopted a substitute (S-1) to the bill that specifies that the State's safe house program and symbol would be the McGruff/child watch house program and McGruff crime dog cartoon character. The House-passed version of the bill merely referred to a neighborhood safe house program and symbol. Also, under the Senate substitute, the crime prevention association of Michigan and the child watch association, in addition to the Michigan Sheriffs' Association and the Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police, would have to collaborate in developing guidelines for the program's establishment and the design or adoption of the McGruff sign and symbol.

FISCAL IMPACT

According to the Department of State Police, the Department has been involved in the past with the development of neighborhood safe house programs. Therefore, the Department would not anticipate additional costs if the bill were to pass. Publicizing the program could be done through public service announcements, background checks could be done through the Law Enforcement Information Network (LEIN) statewide database, development of program guidelines and application forms would not require substantial increases in administrative

costs, and House Concurrent Resolution 29 of 1989 has already designated the McGruff crime dog as the official symbol for homes participating in the neighborhood safe house program.

ARGUMENTS

Supporting Argument

The bill would ensure that safe house programs across the State employed the same symbol, so that any child easily could recognize a safe house anywhere in the State. The additional safeguards provided by the bill (e.g., police background checks, signs that could not easily be reproduced, and numbered and registered signs) are features of the nationally known McGruff House program, which several State have adopted as their sole safe house program. While the importance of background checks on residents of prospective safe houses is obvious, it also is important to ensure that houses not in the program are not identified by false signs. The McGruff program uses a five-color poster picturing McGruff, the trench-coated crime dog cartoon character used in crime prevention advertisements. Thus, unlike programs that use simpler signs such as the silhouette of a hand, the McGruff sign cannot easily be copied and used improperly.

The McGruff program has the further advantage of maintaining a national registry of signs; consequently, a misplaced or stolen sign can be traced back to the program and the house to which it was assigned. Finally, the McGruff character is a recognizable symbol of safety for most children, and House Concurrent Resolution 29, which was adopted by both the House and the Senate, designated the McGruff crime dog as the official symbol for homes participating in the neighborhood safe house program. The bill would provide the statutory framework for statewide implementation of the McGruff/child watch house program.

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This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan Senate staff for use by the Senate in its deliberations and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.