



Michigan County Social Services Association

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Testimony Re: Senate Bill 891

Presented to the House Committee on Families & Children's Services

February 17, 2010

Committee Chair Valentine and Committee members:

I am Mel Haga, Executive Director of the Michigan County Social Services Association (MCSSA). The Association represents the eighty-three local offices of the Michigan Department of Human Services, their directors and staff, the clients they serve and the Human Services Boards of each County. Joining me today is Bill Long, a citizen member of the Human Services Board for Eaton County and a member of the MCSSA Child & Family Services Committee. We are here today, on behalf of the MCSSA, to express support, **with amendments**, for Senate Bill 891.

We recognize the intent of this legislation is to promote the timeliness of decision making leading to a permanent home – hopefully a permanent family - for a child whose parental rights have been involuntarily terminated. The Senate Fiscal Agency Bill Analysis points out that SB 891 and the companion Bills, SB 892 and 893, were a product of discussions by a Permanency Options Workgroup of a forum convened by the Supreme Court and DHS. They identified delay in the Michigan Children's Institute Superintendent's office in acting on requests for the Superintendent's consent to proceed with an adoption for these children as problematic and causing delay in local Courts' ability to approve final adoption.

We believe everyone would support the timeliest permanency possible for a child who has become a ward of the State because the State, through our court system, has terminated her or his parent's rights as parents, and has literally become the temporary "parent" of the child. But that approval for the permanent placement, whether it be through the Superintendent's consent to adoption or by approval for appointment of a guardian, must not be done without a careful and competent review by someone who has the knowledge, experience and background to assess and insure, to the best of his/her ability, that the placement is in the child's

best interest. The law that established the Michigan's Children Institute has placed that "parent" responsibility with the MCI Superintendent.

This responsibility should not be treated lightly. Unfortunately, given Michigan's recent and continuing financial problems, it has been difficult for the MCI office to act as quickly on these requests as local courts, and in fact, the office would like. That's why MCSSA is supportive of allowing the MCI Superintendent to designate one or more individuals who would be authorized to consent to the adoption, marriage, guardianship, or emancipation of a child who has become the State's responsibility. That's what SB 891 does.

But we believe SB 891, at it is before you, should be amended to clarify that the individual or individuals the Superintendent designates this responsibility to, must have educational, experience and any other employment qualifications equal to or exceeding that required of the MCI Superintendent, and that the designee or designees be employees of the Department's Central office. These two conditions on the Superintendent's authority to designate others to carry out the Superintendent's responsibilities are important to maintain the integrity and objectivity of this very critical decision in the life of these children. The requirement of the delegate having the same or greater educational and employment experience as the Superintendent maintains the quality and integrity of this process. The requirement that the delegate be an employee of the Department's central office maintains the objectivity and expertise of the review and consent process. This is particularly important because it maintains a "check and balance" or "second set of eyes" that is there now because it assures that a local county DHS office employee, who may have had direct involvement with the case of a child for whom consent to adoption or guardianship is being requested, can not also be the designee.

MCSSA has expressed this concern and position to the Department and we are hopeful they agree that such an amendment will improve, and in fact in our opinion, is critical to include in this legislation. If SB 891 is amended to include language which addresses this issue, MCSSA will be supportive of its passage.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. We are happy to answer or seek answers to any questions the committee has.