

Committee Substitute for Senate Bill No. 924

An act relating to children; providing legislative findings; creating a Blind Babies Program; providing for early-intervention education for certain children who are blind or visually impaired and for their parents, families, and caregivers; prescribing program emphasis; requiring development of program outcomes, criteria, and performance measures; requiring reports; providing an appropriation; providing an effective date.

Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Florida:

Section 1. The Legislature finds that all children must have a healthy start in life, including babies who are visually impaired or blind. Early-intervention services at the youngest age greatly improve a child's chances for success and self-sufficiency in life and reduce the severity of long-term disabilities resulting from babies not developing normally. It is critical to teach infants and toddlers who are born or become blind or visually impaired, and to teach the parents, families, and caregivers of such children, the skills to assist them so these children do not miss critical developmental stages that are normally dependent on vision. This early intervention is also essential to ensure that these children can access and benefit from other services that assist, educate, train, and employ young people.

Section 2. (1) The Blind Babies Program is created within the Division of Blind Services of the Department of Labor and Employment Security to provide community-based early-intervention education to children from birth through 5 years of age who are blind or visually impaired, and to their parents, families, and caregivers, through community-based provider organizations. The division shall enlist parents, ophthalmologists, pediatricians, schools, Infant and Toddlers Early Intervention Programs, and therapists to help identify and enroll blind and visually impaired children, as well as their parents, families, and caregivers, in these educational programs.

(2) The program is not an entitlement but shall promote early development with a special emphasis on vision skills to minimize developmental delays. The education shall lay the groundwork for future learning by helping a child progress through normal developmental stages. It shall teach children to discover and make the best use of their skills for future success in school. It shall seek to ensure that visually impaired and blind children enter school as ready to learn as their sighted classmates. The program shall seek to link these children, and their parents, families, and caregivers, to other available services, training, education, and employment programs that could assist these families in the future. This linkage may include referrals to the school districts and the Infants and Toddlers Early Intervention Program for assessments to identify any additional services needed which are not provided by the Blind Babies Program. The division shall develop a formula for eligibility based on financial means and may create a means-based matrix to set a copayment fee for families having sufficient financial means.

(3) The division shall establish outcomes for this program, which shall include, but are not limited to, outcomes relating to the children's age-appropriate developmental stages; knowledge of assistive technology; proficiency at daily living; ability to participate in pre-school and school; participation in their communities; and ability to be literate. The division shall develop criteria to be used in identifying and contracting with community-based provider organizations. All services offered through the Blind Babies Program shall be provided by community-based provider organizations. The division shall require any community-based provider organization delivering services under this program to develop performance measures related to those services and report to the division on the progress in achieving those measures.

Section 3. The Office of Program, Policy Analysis, and Government Accountability shall conduct a review of, and prepare a report concerning the Blind Babies Program. The report must be submitted by January 1, 2002, to the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives. The review must be comprehensive but, at a minimum, must specifically determine:

(1) The program's progress towards achieving its established outcomes.

(2) The circumstances contributing to the program's capacity to achieve, not achieve, or exceed its established outcomes.

(3) Whether it will be sound public policy to continue funding the program and the consequences of discontinuing the program.

Section 4. In addition to the sum of \$530,000 appropriated from the General Revenue Fund in the General Appropriations Act for the 2000-2001 fiscal year for the Blind Babies Program, the sum of \$470,000 is appropriated from the General Revenue Fund to the Division of Blind Services of the Department of Labor and Employment Security to fund the Blind Babies Program during the 2000-2001 fiscal year. Of the total amount appropriated for the program in this act and in the General Appropriations Act for the 2000-2001 fiscal year, 90 percent of the funds must be provided for direct consumer services. Funds shall be distributed based on enrollment, which is contingent upon the Division of Blind Services determining eligibility.

Section 5. This act shall take effect July 1, 2000.

Approved by the Governor June 23, 2000.

Filed in Office Secretary of State June 23, 2000.