

Committee Substitute for Senate Bill No. 480

An act relating to children and families; providing legislative findings and intent; creating the Commission on Marriage and Family Support Initiatives within the Department of Children and Family Services; providing for membership; providing scope of activity; providing for coordination with other organizations and entities; providing for funding of the commission; repealing ss. 383.0112, 383.0113, and 383.0114, F.S., relating to the Commission on Responsible Fatherhood and community-based programs to encourage responsible fatherhood; providing an effective date.

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

Section 1. The Commission on Marriage and Family Support Initiatives.—

(1) LEGISLATIVE FINDINGS AND INTENT.—The Legislature finds that:

(a) Families in this state deserve respect and support. Children need support and guidance from both mothers and fathers, and families need support and guidance from community systems to help them thrive.

(b) There are many problems facing families.

(c) Florida is a state rich in diversity, and its population and families come from all over the world, representing many cultures, languages, belief systems, and experiences.

(d) While some relationships between mothers and fathers are broken and beyond repair, others can be nurtured and salvaged with the provision of appropriate community supports to fathers as well as mothers. For parents, these supports may include opportunities to obtain or increase educational levels and employment skills, access to the justice system, support from community agencies to help them become free of substance abuse and violent relationships, and easy and affordable access to relationship-skills education. For some unwed parents, it will be possible and desirable to help them move towards marriage; for others, the optimum goal may be to help them co-parent, spend time with their child, and pay child support regularly.

(e) Assisting states to end dependence of low-income parents by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage and assisting states in encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families are the two of four stated purposes of federal welfare reform enacted in 1996 which have been largely neglected by states and for which states are now urging Congress to designate 10 percent of all welfare funds, specifically for relationship education and skills development, responsible fatherhood programs, and community support as it seeks to reauthorize the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Act in 2002.

(f) Public policy should not operate to force people to get married, should not withdraw or diminish benefits to single mothers merely because they are not married, and should not keep people in abusive relationships.

It is therefore the intent of the Legislature to build on the accomplishments of the Commission on Responsible Fatherhood, which has achieved recognition as a national model of a comprehensive statewide strategy to address fatherhood issues; to increase public awareness of the problems of families, including failing marriages, violence, poverty, substance abuse, lack of access to community systems and supports that families need; and to continue to develop sound public policy related to parenting, marriage, and the effects of poverty, violence, and abuse on children and their families through the work of the Commission on Marriage and Family Support Initiatives. The Legislature further intends that, to the extent practicable, the laws of this state should do all that is possible to provide support for children and encourage, promote, and value strong, safe, long-term marriages and family life that includes grandparents, family members, community support, and all that children need to grow up healthy and to thrive.

(2) ESTABLISHMENT OF COMMISSION.—

(a) There is created within the Department of Children and Family Services, for administrative purposes, a commission, as defined in section 20.03(10), Florida Statutes, called the Commission on Marriage and Family Support Initiatives. The commission is independent of the head of the department. The commission is authorized to hire an executive director, a researcher, and an administrative assistant. The executive director shall report to, and serve at the pleasure of, the commission.

(b) The commission shall consist of 18 members. The commission shall consist of members from the public sector and the private sector, including community and faith-based organizations, but at least 50 percent of the commissioners shall be from the private sector. Commissioners should have experience in one or more of the following areas: business; workforce development; education; health care; treatment of substance abuse; child development; and domestic violence prevention. For the initial appointments, the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representative shall consider making appointments from the current members of the Commission on Responsible Fatherhood.

(c) The Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives shall each appoint six members to the commission. Initial appointments shall be made by August 1, 2003. Each commissioner shall serve a 2-year term, except that for the initial appointments to the commission, the Governor, the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives shall each appoint two members for a term of 3 years, two members for a term of 2 years, and two members for a term of 1 year. A vacancy shall be filled by appointment by the original appointing authority for the unexpired portion of the term.

(d) The first meeting of the commission shall be no later than October 1, 2003. Commissioners shall elect a chair at the first meeting by a majority

vote of the members present, a quorum being present. A majority of the membership constitutes a quorum.

(e) A quorum shall be required for the commission to meet and to conduct business. The commission shall meet semiannually and more frequently upon call of the chair. The commission may conduct its meetings through teleconferences or other similar means.

(f) Commissioners are not entitled to compensation for their services as members, but may be reimbursed for per diem and travel expenses as provided in section 112.061, Florida Statutes.

(3) SCOPE OF ACTIVITY.—The commission shall:

(a) Develop the following documents by October 1, 2004, and, upon their completion, submit a copy to the Governor, the President of the Senate, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the secretary of the department:

1. A report that details comprehensive statewide strategies for Florida to promote safe, violence-free, substance-abuse-free, respectful, nurturing, and responsible parenting, including connection or reconnection of responsible parents, both mothers and fathers, with their families and children;

2. A report that makes recommendations on how to increase the availability of and access to parenting and relationship skills education and training, and to encourage and support the formation and maintenance of two-parent families and family structures that are best for the children. This shall include providing a plan for delivering services and supports to couples and families to help them learn communication and conflict-resolution skills prior to marriage, enable couples to refresh those skills periodically during marriage and, if the marriage fails, provide divorce education, safety planning, and mediation techniques that teach parents how to be safe and to work through their problems and how to minimize the impact of the divorce on their children; and

3. A promising practices manual or tool that highlights successful efforts at promoting marriage and Florida families and family life.

(b) Develop a community awareness campaign to promote community collaboration and coordinated grass-roots programs that show how people, advocates, and agencies can work together to promote marriage in Florida families.

(c) Serve as a clearinghouse for collecting and disseminating information related to research findings on poverty, violence, and other social forces and their effects on families and innovative approaches to the delivery of services necessary for the formation and maintenance of strong families.

(d) By December 31 of each year, beginning December 31, 2003, issue an annual report to the Governor, the President of the Senate, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court on progress it is making on its responsibilities.

(4) COORDINATION.—The commission shall coordinate its work with community-based organizations, including those that are faith-based; with schools, courts, certified local domestic violence centers, adult and juvenile criminal justice systems, and agencies providing social welfare, welfare transition, and child support services; and with any appropriate research and policy development centers, including, but not limited to, those within universities that focus on issues related to families, fatherhood, motherhood, low-income families, marriages, children and poverty, scientific methods to determine paternity for the purpose of addressing support issues, parenting, and relationship skills.

(5) FUNDING.—The operation of the Commission on Marriage and Family Support Initiatives shall be funded from general revenue funds currently allocated to the Commission on Responsible Fatherhood, shall maintain the current connection with the Ounce of Prevention Fund, and shall support and continue any community-based programs established by the Commission on Responsible Fatherhood. The Commission on Marriage and Family Support Initiatives may seek and accept grants or funds from any public source, federal, state, or local, to supplement its operation and defray the expenses incurred in the operation and implementation of this section.

(6) This section is repealed on June 30, 2008, unless reviewed and saved from repeal through reenactment by the Legislature.

Section 2. Sections 383.0112, 383.0113, and 383.0114, Florida Statutes, are repealed.

Section 3. This act shall take effect July 1, 2003.

Approved by the Governor June 10, 2003.

Filed in Office Secretary of State June 10, 2003.