

SUBJECT: Authorizing a study on homeless youth

COMMITTEE: Human Services — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 7 ayes — Raymond, Rose, Keough, S. King, Naishtat, Peña, Spitzer

0 nays

2 absent — Klick, Price

WITNESSES: For — Katherine Barillas, One Voice Texas; Ken Martin, Texas Homeless Network; KayLa Thomas, the World Youth Foundation, Inc.; Lauryn Farris and Sandra Whitley, Thrive Youth Center; Kristopher Sharp; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Katharine Ligon, Center for Public Policy Priorities; Lee Spiller, Citizens Commission on Human Rights; Christine Bryan, Clarity Child Guidance Center; Charles Reed, Dallas County; Daniel Williams, Equality Texas; Greg Hansch, National Alliance on Mental Illness Texas; Will Francis, National Association of Social Workers - Texas Chapter; Judy Powell, Parent Guidance Center; Maureen Milligan, Teaching Hospitals of Texas; Ashley Harris, Texans Care for Children; Jan Friese, Texas Counseling Association; John Kreager, Texas Criminal Justice Coalition; Mark Terry, Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association; Rebecca Flores, Texas School Alliance; Harrison Hiner, Texas State Employees Union; Dimple Patel, TexProtects; Casey Smith, United Ways of Texas; Melanie Babbitt; Michael Gutierrez; Alicia Vogel)

Against — None

On — Jenna Cooper, University of Houston; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Elizabeth “Liz” Kromrei, Department of Family and Protective Services; Naomi Trejo, Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs)

DIGEST: CSHB 679 would require the Department of Housing and Community Affairs, along with the Texas Interagency Council for the Homeless, to

conduct a study on homeless youth in Texas.

As part of the study, the department would be required to collect data on the number of homeless youth in the state, to examine the needs of homeless youth and the degree to which current programs are meeting those needs, to identify sources of funding that might be available to provide services to homeless youth, and to develop a strategic plan establishing steps to be taken and timelines for reducing youth homelessness in Texas.

The bill would define a “homeless youth” as a person who was younger than 25 years old, including a migratory child as defined by federal law, who:

- lacked a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including a person who was temporarily living in a motel or hotel or emergency shelter, was staying in the house of another person, was abandoned in a hospital, or was awaiting foster care placement;
- had a primary nighttime residence that was a public or private place not designed or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for humans; or
- was living in a car, park, other public space, abandoned building, substandard housing, bus or train station, or similar setting.

The department would be required to submit a report on the study to the Legislature by December 1, 2016. The report would have to include recommendations for changes in law necessary to assist and provide services to homeless youth in Texas. The section of law requiring the study would expire September 1, 2017.

This bill would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2015.

SUPPORTERS CSHB 679 would be an important step in addressing youth homelessness

SAY: by requiring that data be collected on this population and its needs. Available data suggest that the state has an abundance of homeless youth, although the precise number currently is unknown. Estimates based on federal data indicate that more than 110,000 students in Texas public schools have been identified as homeless. More information is needed on how many homeless youth are in Texas and what actions must be taken to reduce youth homelessness.

The bill would help to address a pressing societal issue. National statistics show homeless youth are vulnerable to human trafficking, to low educational attainment, to mental health issues, and to other negative outcomes associated with lacking a safe and stable living environment. A University of Houston study on homeless youth in Harris County found that many youth who go to shelters do not stay the night because the shelters are full. In addition, more than half of those surveyed had been involved in a public system of care at some point, such as foster care or the juvenile justice system. More comprehensive data about youth homelessness across Texas would help the state to better serve the needs of this population.

Currently, state agencies and nonprofit or faith-based service providers have to rely on anecdotal evidence, national statistics, or a patchwork of local studies to inform their work. Point-in-time counts, which aim to tally the number of homeless people on the street, do not always provide an accurate assessment of the numbers and needs of homeless youth, especially if the youth are living in a shelter or are otherwise indoors. Furthermore, these assessments are not statewide surveys, and there is no consistent definition of homeless youth across these studies, making estimates inaccurate and inconsistent. A statewide study on homeless youth would ensure that state dollars were spent efficiently to better measure this population and to take steps to improve outcomes for homeless youth.

OPPONENTS SAY: CSHB 679 would be unnecessary because local and national organizations already gather this information through point-in-time counts and other

studies. The state does not need to duplicate the work of nonprofits and faith-based organizations.

NOTES:

Unlike CSHB 679, the bill as filed would have directed the Department of Family and Protective Services, the Texas Education Agency, and the Texas Homeless Education Office to assist the Department of Housing and Community Affairs with the study. The substitute would direct the Texas Interagency Council for the Homeless, which includes representatives from various agencies, to assist with the study. The substitute also would require the department, as part of the study, to develop a strategic plan establishing steps to be taken and timelines for reducing youth homelessness in this state.

The Senate companion bill, SB 1892 by Garcia, was referred to the Senate Health and Human Services Committee on March 25.