



Senator Hamrick to introduce Child Protection & Public Safety Act

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ATLANTA, Georgia (April 2, 2009) – State Senator Bill Hamrick (R-Carrollton) today initiated a sweeping revision of the state’s Juvenile Code by introducing a 228-page bill designed to modernize and streamline the 38-year-old crazy quilt of laws that govern the way the state deals with children who are pulled into the state’s civil and criminal justice system.

Senator Hamrick said he expected a subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee would conduct a series of meetings and hearings on the legislation – called the Child Protection and Public Safety Act (SB 292) – between now and when the 2010 General Assembly convenes next January.

“This is an important, complex piece of legislation designed to improve the manner in which our courts interact with children,” said Hamrick, who serves as vice chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee. “The effort itself is long overdue, but I want to be sure we take the time necessary both to understand the implications of the bill and to educate our fellow members of the General Assembly.”

Hamrick also praised a coalition of public interest groups that have spearheaded the effort to revise Georgia’s Juvenile Code. Known as JUSTGeorgia, the coalition includes Georgia Appleseed, the Barton Child Law and Policy Clinic of the Emory University School of Law, and Voices for Georgia’s Children.

“For more than a year now, the JUSTGeorgia coalition has done the hard work of carefully analyzing Georgia’s existing Juvenile Code and developing thoughtful improvements,” Hamrick said. “They have pulled together a wealth of valuable input from juvenile court judges, social workers, lawyers who work in the juvenile justice system, and, not least, affected children and their families. I look forward to continuing to work with them as we move this legislation through the General Assembly.”

Mindy Binderman, a JUSTGeorgia representative, praised Hamrick's support for the new legislation. "We greatly appreciate Senator Hamrick's hard work and diligence on this very important matter," said Binderman. "This legislation will have a positive impact on the lives of thousands of Georgia children."

Key objectives of the legislation include:

- Rewriting the Juvenile Code to eliminate conflicts between different parts of the law, which has been patched together over the past four decades, and establish clear, consistent definitions. "To some degree," said Senator Hamrick, "this is housekeeping legislation, but it's a big, old house that hasn't been cleaned in a long time, and things have gotten a little jumbled up and out of order."
- Making the courts more responsive to minors who are pulled into the judicial system. The new law would, for example, require a single judge to handle all cases involving a particular child or family, and the Court of Appeals would be urged to give priority to cases involving child abuse.
- Helping troubled families and children address problems by bringing schools, social services and other agencies together without first requiring a formal court hearing, as is currently the case. "The intent of this provision is to create a legal mechanism that allows public agencies to respond more quickly to the needs of troubled children without having to go through a time-consuming court process," said Hamrick.
- Guaranteeing children a voice and legal guidance in juvenile court. The proposed rewrite would require that children be included in all decisions about their lives, and that all abused children be represented by an attorney.
- Helping abused children succeed as adults. The bill would require the state to help children in foster care make the transition out of foster care to living on their own as adults. Specifically, the state would be required, in the year before an abused child in foster care turns 18, to ensure that they be given essential information and documents, including birth certificate, Georgia identification card, instruction on how to open a bank account, and an initial plan for living and working on their own.

Hamrick said his bill would not seek to change the law that sends 17-year-olds accused of committing crimes to superior court rather than juvenile court. "This is an issue that inspires a lot of passion on both sides of the argument," he said. "At some point I think the General Assembly should debate this issue anew. But our thinking at this point is that we can do a lot of good with the legislation as it is now drafted, and perhaps set the stage for a more informed debate on the age issue once we pass this measure."

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About JUSTGeorgia – JUSTGeorgia (www.justga.org) is a coalition advocating for improvement in juvenile justice and the underlying social service systems that serve Georgia’s children. Its two primary objectives are the passage of a new Georgia juvenile code and changes in system practices covering health, education, deprivation and children’s services that can help kids stay out of trouble, minimize risk of abuse in homes and promote safer communities. JUSTGeorgia is anchored by the Georgia Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, Barton Child Law & Policy Clinic of Emory University and Voices for Georgia’s Children.