

Contentious foster care reform bill headed to Idaho House

By KATHRYN HAAKE, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — After four hours of testimony Monday, an Idaho House panel passed a contentious foster care reform bill that would allow judges to oversee adoptions and implement a timeframe for relatives to apply to care for a child.

The House Judiciary, Rules and Administration Committee voted unanimously in support of the measure, despite concerns voiced by the Department of Health and Welfare and other child welfare workers.

Miren Unsworth, manager for the state's child welfare program, specifically argued against implementing the stricter timeframes mandated in the bill, saying it wouldn't give relatives of children enough time to respond.

While state prosecutors and public defenders who work in child protective cases asked for more time to address some of the policy changes the bill addresses.

However, Rep. Christy Perry, R-Nampa, said the department has known about alleged deficiencies for 10 years and has done nothing to fix the problems.

"We know there are problems," she said. "Every person that has come in here knows it and has known it for years."

Perry, who sponsored the measure, said the reforms are just the beginning of changes she would like to see implemented in the department. The former foster care parent is planning on bringing another bill forward to establish an interim committee to work on foster care reform.

Dozens of foster parents attended the hearing with a handful giving personal testimony — accusing the department of moving foster children at a moment's notice. Several testified their foster children were placed with distant relatives who abused and neglected the children, before abandoning them to the system.

Merritt Dublin, a volunteer attorney and former foster parent, said the bill would provide greater oversight of the department.

"These stories are real," she said. "These are not disgruntled foster parents. These are people who were trying to advocate for the true best interests of their children."

The committee also unanimously passed a second bill that would require the foster care program to present the Legislature with an annual report.

Both measures must now pass the House floor.

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