



# Capitol Network News

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## TASK FORCE HEARS REPORT ON CHILDREN'S SERVICES

By Shawn Ashley  
Staff Writer

■(GIT) Oklahoma's Advisory Task Force on Children's Services was asked repeatedly Wednesday to remember two words: home visitation.

Home visitation, the task force was told by Debbie Richardson, with the Healthy Families child abuse program, and representatives of the Department of Health, is a key component in the fight against child abuse and neglect.

Referring to a number of studies which identified early intervention as the most important factor in decreasing abuse rates and improving parenting skills, Richardson told the panel that home visitation, particularly for first-time parents, was key to initiating those intervention efforts.

"At birth or before," said Richardson, "parents are hungry for information about parenting and the challenges they will be facing. It is the most critical time at which we can approach them."

That fact, combined with the findings of both public and private studies, Richardson said, led the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse to recommend in 1992 that a

nationwide home visitation system be put in place. Called Healthy Families America, the initiative was based on the idea that first-time parents would participate voluntarily and would use those who visit their homes as resources for help in a variety of areas, such as parenting skills and other areas of need. The proposed system, Richardson said, would also rely on community-based help organizations to provide the needed services to the families.

Currently, Richardson told the task force, some 200 programs in 36 states utilize the recommendations of the national committee, including eight in Oklahoma.

The current problem Richardson said, is that there is not the infrastructure that is needed to provide the training and technical assistance, evaluation, research and development of new programs and expansion of

existing programs. Such an effort, she said, would require approximately \$33 million annually in Oklahoma.

The success, however, of such statewide efforts, Richardson said, has been borne out in Hawaii and Connecticut, which have both reported positive results from statewide home visitation and early intervention programs.

Representatives of the Department of Health supported Richardson's claims before the task force, noting that the state's child abuse prevention program relied heavily on the idea of home visitation and early intervention in its efforts to combat child abuse.

Also appearing before the task force were Midge Woodard, who oversees the Department of Human Services foster care program, and Debi Farmer, department program ad-

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## LUKE BILL AUTHOR DISAGREES WITH LACKEY

By Shawn Ashley  
Staff Writer

■(GIT) The author of what is considered the state's most extensive child abuse reform legislation in recent memory disagrees with the governor's human services secretary over the possible impact her legislation could have had in the case of an eight-year-old boy believed murdered last year.

"The bill requires that multidisciplinary teams be established in each district attorney's district," explained Rep. Laura Boyd, D-Norman and author of HB2053, the so-called Ryan Luke Bill.

A report prepared by a special task force appointed by Governor Frank Keating to investigate the handling of the Shane Coffman case repeatedly recommended the implementation of multidisciplinary teams in child abuse investigations. The body of the eight-year-old Coffman child was found in an abandoned freezer outside a trailer house once occupied by his family. Keating appointed the special task force, headed by Secretary of Human Services Ken Lackey, after reports that law enforcement agencies

and the Department of Human Services had multiple contacts with the family prior to the boy's death, going so far in one case as to remove the little boy and his siblings from their mother's care.

During a Nov. 1 press conference, Lackey said he doubted any of the provisions of the Ryan Luke Bill, which ironically took effect the same day the task force released its report, would have benefited Coffman.

Boyd disagrees, saying some of the recommendations included in the task force's report address specific issues covered by her legislation, particularly the establishment of multidisciplinary teams.

"I think it's an area in which we may need to do additional work," said Boyd, "but it's a requirement of my legislation."

Boyd stopped short of saying the presence of a multidisciplinary team would have prevented the Coffman child's death, explaining that it's impossible to speculate on how a case would have been handled if different procedures were in place.

"What we have to do," she said, "is look  
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