

FALLIN GIVES COMMISSION LESSON IN LAW MAKING

By Shawn Ashley
Staff Writer

■(GIT) Lt. Governor Mary Fallin gave her commission on workers' compensation reform members a lesson in law making Wednesday, emphasizing that passage of the panel's proposed recommendations would likely draw some opposition.

Fallin, who formed the so-called Fallin Commission on Workers' Compensation Reform earlier this year, said some shots had already been fired at her and the commission, ranging from the claim that she was planning to use the commission's work as a springboard to seek the governor's office to accusations that the panel was dominated by big business and excluded lawyers. None of those claims, Fallin stressed, were true.

Those claims and others, Fallin said, would be part of the plan of attack launched by those she said support the status quo. That attack, she added, would be aimed at defeating the commission's efforts before the legislature.

To prove her point, Fallin showed a videotape of a paid program that recently aired on an Oklahoma City television station. An installment of a four-part series, the program focused on the workers' compensation system and claimed to address questions about the system, including, "What rights would be lost if the system is changed."

Specifically, the program attempted to lead viewers to the conclusion that efforts to reform the system were aimed primarily at eliminating the right of injured workers to be represented by an attorney. Such a recommendation has not been advanced by the

commission and the accusation was denied Wednesday by Fallin.

While visibly drawing the ire of some commission members, the program also drew laughs, particularly when one of its participants said, "Oklahoma has one of the better, if not best, workers' compensation systems" in the country and is used as a model by other states.

Fallin has reiterated since the commission's start that her reason for calling together those involved, which include representatives of small and large employers, as well as representatives of the medical, legal and insurance industries, was the result of her discussions with state business people who complained that the workers' compensation system was too costly and cumbersome.

Fallin also outlined Wednesday some of the components to be included in the legislation resulting from the commission's work and introduced Sen. Jim Maddox, D-Lawton, who has agreed to carry the legislation during the 46th Legislature.

Recommendations for inclusion in the yet-to-be-written bill include:

- Legislative establishment of a clear

Children's Services, cont. from page 1 ministrator, who explained that the state's need for foster families currently outpaces the availability of such families. Specifically, Woodard said, some 3,500 children are now in foster care in the state, while only 1,600 foster families are available. Approximately 300 of those, she added, participated without the benefit of reimbursement normally associated with being a foster parent.

Efforts are underway at the county level, Farmer said, to recruit new foster families, but staff limitations sometimes make it impossible to respond to all the inquiries concerning the program. Additionally, she noted, the foster care division will ask the Commission on Human Service to approve the expenditure of up to \$800,000 to pay daycare costs for foster families in which both parents work as part of an effort "to tap into a new family base" for foster care placements. Currently, Farmer explained, such reimbursement is not available and its absence may discourage families in which both adults work from considering becoming a foster family.

The money, Farmer said, would cover the anticipated costs for the second-half of the 1997 fiscal year.

statement of the intent of the purpose of the workers' compensation;

- Creation of a legislatively-sound, state-wide mediation system;
- Reduction of the temporary disability maximum limit to 104 weeks;
- Allowing employers to direct the medical treatment to be received by those claiming workplace injuries, except in emergency situations;

- Elimination of the ability to claim permanent disability from a soft tissue injury when an employee returns to the same job;

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at what unfortunately has happened and try to take steps to prevent it from happening again."

Specifically, Boyd said, there may be a need to hire what she called part-time coordinators to work with the teams.

"I'm interested in seeing some uniformity in the way these teams work," she explained. "I would like to see everyone on the same page, doing things essentially the same way."

Boyd's suggestion bears a certain resemblance to a suggestion made by Governor Keating, who said a primary investigator should direct child abuse cases and make sure every piece of information is properly investigated and processed. A key concern expressed by the task force focused on the large number of Department of Human Services and law enforcement reports about the family, many of which were never examined by later investigators.

"I could see (a chief investigator proposal) if it worked within the framework of the multidisciplinary teams," Boyd said. "I think I would be more comfortable with someone who was designated as a coordinator, rather than a chief investigator, simply because they could be responsible for coordinating the investigation, as well as ensuring compliance with any court orders involved in a case."

That, Boyd admits, may not be a popular position because it implies added costs.

"It's something I think we're going to have to consider," the Norman Democrat said, "so that we can ensure the kind of uniformity I think everyone wants in the way these kinds of cases are handled."

Boyd said she plans to author more child abuse legislation to be considered by the 46th Legislature, much of which will focus on prevention efforts.

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GIT, Inc.

P.O. Box 61206
Oklahoma City, OK 73146-1206
Office (405) 528-2546
Fax (405) 521-9807
Net: gitinc@ionet.net
Web: <http://www.exoweb.com/git>

Darwin P. Maxey, Publisher
Mary Millen, Editor

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