

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 6168

As Passed Senate, February 9, 2000

Title: An act relating to the department of social and health services phone answering system.

Brief Description: Requiring the department of social and health services to have a phone system that facilitates access to a departmental employee rather than voice mail.

Sponsors: Senators Fairley, Patterson and Kline.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Human Services & Corrections: 1/20/2000, 1/21/2000 [DP-WM].
Passed Senate, 2/9/2000, 46-0.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES & CORRECTIONS

Majority Report: Do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators Hargrove, Chair; Costa, Vice Chair; Franklin, Kohl-Welles, Long, Patterson, Stevens and Zarelli.

Staff: Jinnah Rose-McFadden (786-7444)

Background: The public has expressed frustration when contacting the Department of Social and Health Services because the telephone system relies upon automated services, preventing or delaying contact with a person.

Summary of Bill: The Department of Social and Health Services must make a person available to respond to incoming telephone calls during regular hours of operation. Calls on primary public service numbers must be answered promptly. The department must monitor its response time in an effort to limit hold time to five minutes or less. The Department of General Administration must ensure that the Department of Social and Health Services can comply with the requirements of the statute.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 16, 2000.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: Summer workgroups revealed a general discontent with the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS). Complaints were heard that DSHS regularly fails to answer telephones and return telephone calls. Although DSHS created a policy in October of 1999, purporting to address these concerns, the problem persists and people have difficulties reaching employees by telephone.

There is a concern that by failing to promptly answer and return telephone calls, DSHS is disinterested in meeting community needs. This seeming disinterest reflects poorly on government in general.

Testimony Against: DSHS is in favor of increasing the community's telephone access to the department. In 1999, the department set up a quality assurance team to evaluate access issues. In response to the team's recommendations, DSHS has created new policies. DSHS asks that the Legislature allow the department to self-regulate this issue by giving these policies more time to take effect and start working.

The Department of General Administration (GA) is opposed to the bill to the extent that GA is placed in the position of regulating DSHS's compliance with the bill. GA does not view itself as a regulatory agency.

Testified: Senator Fairley (pro); Ken Harden, Department of Social and Health Services (con); Cindy Runger, Department of General Administration (con).