

BILL ANALYSIS

H.B. 474
By: Hull
Juvenile Justice & Family Issues
Committee Report (Unamended)

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Court-appointed volunteer advocate programs, also known as CASA, are an important part of the Texas child welfare system. Their presence in a child's life can be the deciding factor in court cases and whether the child has a negative or positive outcome in their case. However, an evaluation of CASA programs published in 2019, "The Effect of CASA on Child Welfare Permanency Outcomes," showed negative outcomes for children working with these special advocates. H.B. 474 seeks to improve and strengthen these localized programs by requiring accountability and transparency so that the programs can be the best possible quality for the families they serve. While CASA programs keep a list of trained volunteers, current law does not require a designation to be made between trained volunteers who are active versus those who are inactive. H.B. 474 adds defined terms to differentiate between active and inactive trained volunteers and requires each program to provide a grievance process for the individuals being served, which will allow for more standardization across programs.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE IMPACT

It is the committee's opinion that this bill does not expressly create a criminal offense, increase the punishment for an existing criminal offense or category of offenses, or change the eligibility of a person for community supervision, parole, or mandatory supervision.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

It is the committee's opinion that this bill does not expressly grant any additional rulemaking authority to a state officer, department, agency, or institution.

ANALYSIS

H.B. 474 amends the Family Code to include the following among the requirements that a nonprofit entity operating a local court-appointed volunteer advocate program must satisfy to be eligible for a contract with the statewide volunteer advocate organization that supports the local programs:

- the entity must adopt a grievance procedure to address complaints regarding negligence or misconduct related to a volunteer advocate's duties; and
- the entity must maintain accurate records regarding active volunteer advocates and inactive volunteer advocates under the program.

The bill specifies that the contract between the Health and Human Services Commission and the statewide volunteer advocate organization must include measurable goals and objectives relating to the number of both active and inactive volunteer advocates in the program.

H.B. 474 defines "active volunteer advocate" as an individual who has been trained by a volunteer advocate program in accordance with recognized standards for volunteer advocate programs and is currently serving as a volunteer advocate on at least one child's case and defines "inactive volunteer advocate" as an individual who has received such training and is not currently serving as a volunteer advocate.

EFFECTIVE DATE

September 1, 2023.