

Looking Out For At-Risk Kids

HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.)
 — In an ongoing effort to protect the Commonwealth's abused and neglected children, the House and Senate have approved a resolution calling for a review of county Children and Youth Services, according to Rep. Sheila Miller (R-129).

"Sadly, cases of child abuse, sexual abuse and neglect seem to be escalating both in numbers and in level of severity," Miller said. "These growing caseloads are placing a great deal of strain on the people who are trying to help these children."

She noted the wide range of services offered through the county agencies, including services to parents and children to enable the children to remain in their homes, placement services for children who cannot live with their birth family, adoption services and any other service or care ordered by the court for children.

The resolution calls on the Joint State Government Commission to form a task force to undertake a study of the children and youth services delivery system in the Commonwealth. The task force, made up of four members each of the Senate and House of Representatives, must determine whether the system is meeting the needs of at-risk children and families, and if not it must recommend ways to improve the system.

"This task force will carry on the work that we in the House began when the Aging and Youth Committee formed a special sub-

committee to review the tragic death of Maxwell Fisher in Berks County in 1996," Miller said. "As a member of that subcommittee, I soon discovered there were many legislative changes we could make to improve the system."

For example, Gov. Tom Ridge recently signed into law a bill that would require Child Protective Service providers to have face-to-face contact with children considered to be at a high risk for abuse on at least a weekly basis. Prior to this law, the standard was to meet with them face to face "as often as necessary," but not less than monthly.

Another new law, introduced by Miller, ensures that confiden-

tial child abuse reports are readily available to district justices so they have the information they need to make a decision in the best interest of the child.

A third proposal, which would require the state Department of Welfare to review all child death cases where families have been involved with county children and youth agencies, was approved by the House and now awaits Senate action.

"We will never forget the tragic death of little Maxwell Fisher," Miller said. "In honor of his memory, we must do everything we can to ensure all children have a chance at a happy, healthy, full life from now on."

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