

Aid to families of handicapped OK'd

By Tim Richard
staff writer

State Rep. Gordon Sparks, R-Troy, gritted his teeth and voted "no," the only area legislator to oppose state subsidies to families taking care of their own handicapped children.

"It's one of the toughest votes I've had to cast," said the freshman lawmaker, who still sees "a serious need" to help such families.

The Michigan House last week voted 79-27 to adopt a system of grants of up to \$2,500 a year for families who keep their mentally, physically and autistic impaired children out of state institutions and care for them at home.

The measure (House Bill 4448) goes to the Senate, where action is expected in the fall session.

HOUSE PASSAGE was a major victory for Rep. Debbie Stabenow, D-Lansing, a third-term champion of welfare, women's and mental health legislation.

(Meanwhile, a group in her home district was starting a recall campaign, citing her liberalism on welfare measures and her vote in favor of Gov. James J. Blanchard's income tax increase.)

Stabenow's bill was supported by Democrats Justine Barns of Westland, John Bennett of Redford, Maxine Bernman of Southfield, William Keith of

Garden City and Wilfred Webb of Hazel Park as well as Republicans W.V. Brotherton of Farmington, Mat Dussakias of Lake Orion, Jack Kirksey of Livonia and Robert Law of Flynn.

"We heard testimony from a lot of parents," dissenter Sparks said in an interview, "and it was heart-rending. A serious need exists."

"BUT I PREFER Wartner's approach," Sparks said, citing a bill by Rep. Fred Wartner, R-Portage, to provide tax credits to families who take care of their own handicapped children.

Sparks said the Stabenow bill "gives the same subsidy to an upper-income family as a lower-income family" while tax credits would address family need more directly.

Wartner told the House the benefits under Stabenow's bill would be subject to federal income taxes. Thus, the \$4.5 million cost to the state would filter through the pockets of Michigan parents receiving the subsidies and wind up in Washington.

And Sparks had his doubts whether the state would be able to close down wings of institutions if parents took care of their handicapped children.

Stabenow, however, billed her measure as a money-saver for the state. "It costs \$45,000 to keep a child in an institution, but this subsidy is only \$2,500.

In other words, it would cost as much to keep 18 children at home as to keep one in an institution," she said in an interview after the vote.

For every 12 beds that are emptied, Stabenow added, a wing of an institution could be closed.

OTHER LEGISLATORS, even those with handicapped children, had mixed emotions about the subsidies.

"I question the sense of starting a program such as this right now," said Rep. John Maynard, D-St. Clair Shores, who opposed the measure. "Something needs to be done, but a lot has been done. My wife has a severely retarded brother . . . a severe cross to bear, but they (the family) have done that — without state help."

Rep. Carl Gnodtke, R-Sawyer, has a 2½-year-old handicapped daughter and admitted the bill would help him, but said, "It's not the right way to go. I'm

going to vote no anyway."

But Rep. Donald Gilmer, R-Augusta, cited a letter from a constituent who said, "The \$2,500 a year will allow us to move out of our mobile home and make payments on a house."

And Rep. Fred Dillingham, R-Fowlerville, a single parent, pleaded for passage, citing his need to rise at 6 a.m. to care for a 9-year-old daughter who is spastic and whose arms and bladder are paralyzed.

"This is not only a strong policy statement, but it answers the question many parents ask: 'Why can a foster home receive payment from the state for caring for the handicapped and parents cannot?'"

"What I and many parents need is an extra hand," Dillingham said. "There are parents I know who will keep that child at home as long as they can, with or without help from the state."

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