

Proposals designed to ease adoption troubles

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Finding good families for homeless kids was the chief goal of Lt. Gov. Connie Binsfeld's Commission on Adoption.

Bills by Sen. Robert Geake, R-Northville, and Rep. Maxine Berman, D-Southfield, are among the 21-bill package passed by the state Senate prior to its spring break.

The Geake-Berman package will require health insurers to cover children the day they enter their new homes rather than a year later, when the adoption becomes final.

"A child is a child," philosophized Berman, who has worked three years on the project, often with opposition from insurers.

Currently, adoptive parents frequently take their birth children to one doctor and their adopted children to another, sometimes in another town, who accepts Medicaid payments.

Meanwhile, Gov. John Engler's administration used a recommen-

dation from the Binsfeld Commission to speed up the process of placing abused and neglected children who are wards of the state.

The Department of Social Services effort to speed the process is being hailed as good news by those who want to see children "united with their forever families," in Binsfeld's words.

Oakland Probate Judge Joan E. Young praised the work of Rich-

ard Hoekstra, director of the division of adoption services for the state DSS.

"In 1991 we did 1,320 adoptions. In 1993 we did 1,959," an increase of 48 percent, said Hoekstra.

"First, we made changes in 1992 in our contracts with private agencies that we rely on to place half of our children. We give them (agencies) a financial incentive to place them within the first eight

months of wardship — don't let them linger.

"Second, we made a diligent effort to get kids listed on the exchange," a state directory of available children.

Of the 5,000 adoptions done in Michigan each year, about 20 percent were state wards, the Binsfeld Commission reported.

In 1991 some 1,600 children a year were becoming state wards, but only 1,200 a year were being

adopted. So the pool of state wards was growing at 400 children a year. At that rate, the pool would have grown to 5,000 by the year 2000.

"But the administration was criticized by one member of the Binsfeld Commission, Don Marengere of Bloomfield Township. Former president of Adoption Option, Marengere said the state is cutting back its services to birth mothers, often unmarried

teen-agers.

He cited the closing of Marillac Hall, a Farmington Hills contractor which provided prenatal services, including adoption counseling, to young mothers.

"Half the low-birthweight babies in Detroit are born to teen mothers," Marengere said. "It costs \$2,000 per day to care for those babies until they can be released. You know who pays for that? The taxpayers."

Birth-parent searches addressed

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Adults who were adopted as children will have a new tool to find their birth parents in a package of bills winding through the Michigan Legislature.

"They can get a court-appointed 'confidential intermediary' to locate birth parents and ask them if they wish contact with the children they gave up for adoption years ago.

"Some of us do that already," said Oakland Probate Judge Joan E. Young. "We may authorize a staff member or someone from an agency."

"It has been successful. The times I've used it, it has worked well. The birth parent is asked, 'Do you want to be found?' The majority say yes. Sometimes they say, 'Not right now,'" Young said. A Bloomfield Township resident, Young was a member of the Lt. Gov. Connie Binsfeld's Commission on Adoption that worked in 1991-2 to suggest administrative changes and new laws.

It's confidential

The "confidential intermediary" (CI) bill was sponsored by Sen. Michael Bouchard, R-Birmingham. It codifies into the probate code the kinds of efforts Young and other judges tried.

The bill also would ease the problem adult adoptees face in obtaining non-identifying information about their parents. Many testified in House hearings held by Rep. David Gubow, D-Huntington Woods, that the inability to learn their own genetic histories prevented them from getting treatment.

Other key elements of the Bouchard bill:

■ After receiving a petition from an adult adoptee, a probate judge could appoint a CI who would take an oath not to report "identifying information in sealed records without written consent" of the birth parent. A CI who released confidential information could be held in contempt of court.

■ The CI would be allowed access to confidential adoption records and would approach the birth parent through "a discreet and confidential inquiry." The birth parent could say "yes," "no" or "not now." A "yes" would have to be in writing.

■ The CI's compensation would be limited to reimbursement for actual expenses from the petitioner.

Bouchard's bill has passed the Senate and will be taken up by the House Judiciary Committee after the spring break.

Speed it up

One goal of the Binsfeld Commission was to find adoptive families faster for abused and neglected children who are wards of the state.

That already has occurred through administrative changes that required no change in the law. Young said, praising the work of Richard Hoekstra, director of the division of adoption services for the state Department of Social Services.

"In 1991 we did 1,320 adoptions. In 1993 we did 1,959," an increase of 48 percent, said Hoekstra.

Refer to Senate Bill 209 when writing to your state representative. House Bill 4000.

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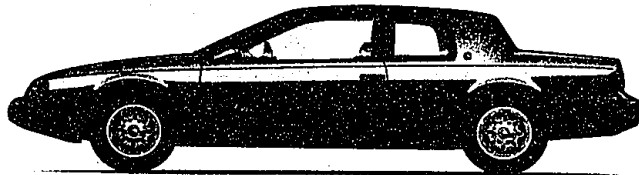
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