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Editorial: Keep working on adoption bills

Faith-based providers deserve protection

Michigan's faith-based agencies that provide adoption and foster care services deserve statutory protection that allows them to operate by their religious principles.

That's the goal of legislation waiting for action in the House after being reported from committee last month. The Department of Human Services, which oversees adoption, foster care and other child protective services in the state, did not support the bills in the form they took as they left committee.

Both the committee chair and DHS officials have indicated they are hopeful of an agreement. They should work toward that. DHS had long relied on the services of private agencies to help meet the state's needs in foster care and adoption services. The Michigan Catholic Conference says about half of the private agencies providing such services in the state are faith-based. Some of them limit their work to foster parents and adoptive parents who provide family structure that is consistent with religious beliefs.

In the case of Catholic agencies, that means not working with unmarried couples. But there are agencies that do work with unmarried couples and same-sex couples, including some that are faith based. And that's the key: As long as services can be provided to diverse families elsewhere, agencies with religious affiliations should be able to operate under those beliefs.

In practice, officials say that's what's been done already. If necessary, agencies transfer clients to other agencies. The Catholic Conference and other faith-based organizations say the bills would codify what has been standard practice. DHS officials raised concerns last month that the bills may go beyond what has been the existing practice; that concern should be addressed before final passage.

Some suggest that all agencies should be required to take all clients, especially where state money is involved. But the state money isn't providing profits for religious organizations; it's spent on services for the children.

DHS relies on private agencies to help stretch limited resources. It has been actively working to recruit new foster families among the church community. In 2012 it held a summit designed to help recruit foster families from religious congregations.

People of all backgrounds should have access to services, but there should also be room for diversity of service providers, including those who operate within religious principles.

An LSJ editorial

Additional Facts

Michigan should create protections for faith-based agencies that work in foster care and adoption.