

## HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STAFF ANALYSIS

**BILL #:** HB 447 Family Court Efficiency  
**SPONSOR(S):** Planas  
**TIED BILLS:** **IDEN./SIM. BILLS:** SB 586

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REFERENCE	ACTION	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR
1) Judiciary		Birtman	Havlicak
2) Future of Florida Families			
3) State Administration			
4) Judicial Appropriations (sub)			
5) Appropriations			

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### SUMMARY ANALYSIS

The Florida Supreme Court has noted that the key to fair, timely, consistent, efficient, and effective handling of multiple cases related to one family begins with the judicial system being aware of all related cases involving one family. This bill attempts to improve the operation of the family court system in three ways:

- The bill allows the Supreme Court to create a unique identifier to identify all court cases related to the same family.
- The bill provides that specified orders entered in dependency court take precedence over other orders entered in civil proceedings.
- The bill provides that final orders and evidence admitted in dependency actions are admissible in evidence in subsequent civil proceedings under certain circumstances.

It appears that this bill does not have a fiscal impact.

## FULL ANALYSIS

### I. SUBSTANTIVE ANALYSIS

#### A. DOES THE BILL:

- |                                      |   |                             |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|---|
| 1. Reduce government?                | Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| 2. Lower taxes?                      | Yes <input type="checkbox"/>            | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Expand individual freedom?        | Yes <input type="checkbox"/>            | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Increase personal responsibility? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/>            | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Empower families?                 | Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input type="checkbox"/>            |

For any principle that received a “no” above, please explain:

#### B. EFFECT OF PROPOSED CHANGES:

##### Background

Florida’s initiative for family court reform began as a result of the increasing demands being placed on the judicial system by the large volume of cases involving children and families. As the number of family court filings and post-judgment matters continues to skyrocket, the Supreme Court has noted that it must also seek to enhance judicial productivity and conserve judicial resources.<sup>1</sup> Against this background, the Court created the Family Court Steering Committee to among other things, advise the Court about the circuits’ responses to families in litigation and make recommendations on the characteristics of a model family court.<sup>2</sup>

The Family Court Steering Commission developed a host of recommendations, among which is the guiding principle that:

Cases involving inter-related family law issues should be consolidated or coordinated to maximize use of court resources to avoid conflicting decisions and to minimize inconvenience to the families.<sup>3</sup>

The Supreme Court endorsed this guiding principle, and noted that there is no justification to have situations in which families were required to appear before one judge in a dissolution proceeding that included determination of custody of the children and at the same time have a hearing before another judge concerning the juvenile dependency of one of the children including the determination of the custody of that child.<sup>4</sup>

In 2002, a joint interim project was conducted by the Senate Committee on Judiciary and the Senate Committee on Children and Families. During the course of the interim project, it became clear that specific statutory changes could substantially improve the ability of the court to tailor a comprehensive resolution to a child or family’s legal matters in current and other pending related matters within the existing structure of the family, delinquency, and dependency court divisions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See *In Re Report of the Family Court Steering Committee*, 794 So.2d 518 (Fla. 2001). The court, at p.520, reports that as of 1998 and 1999, family law cases constituted the largest percentage of all circuit court filings – over 40%. The court also reported that for this same period, these cases overwhelmingly represented the largest percentage of circuit court reopenings at almost 70%.

<sup>2</sup> See *In Re Report of the Commission on Family Courts*, 633 So.2d 14 (Fla. 1994).

<sup>3</sup> See *In Re Report of the Commission on Family Courts*, 794 So.2d 518, 522 (Fla. 2001), recommendation 4.

<sup>4</sup> See *In Re Report of the Family Court Steering Committee*, at 526.

<sup>5</sup> See Senate Interim Project Report 2002-141, Review of Family Courts Division and the Model Family Court: Court Services and System, and Senate Interim Project Report 2002-121, Review of Family Courts Division and the Model Family Court: Other Services and Systems for Children and Families.

Under current law, legal issues involving children and families are frequently addressed piecemeal by different divisions of the court, particularly in larger judicial circuits. In many cases, the parties are appearing before a different judge in each proceeding. Frequently, due to lack of information sharing, coordination or case-management, the judge is completely unaware of previous or pending related legal matters involving the same children or family before the court. Moreover, the child or family's underlying non-legal issues may go undetected or unaddressed. Consequently, these non-legal matters may have caused or served to exacerbate a child's and family's legal problems, necessitating further judicial intervention or court appearances.

### **Judicial Case Coordination and Information Sharing**

Currently, there is no single or uniform system of judicial case coordination in the state. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the components of judicial case management systems vary between counties based on the demographics, resources available, and the nature of cases. Although a number of existing information systems exist throughout the state, many of them are not coordinated or integrated to facilitate information sharing either within or outside the court system. In addition, courts' current ability to track and coordinate related cases is complicated by the increased mobility of family households between circuits and the divergent and evolving nature of family household dynamics. Current statutory authority does not appear to exist for the collection and use of the social security number, either in its entirety or in part, for case coordination purposes.<sup>6</sup>

This bill creates s. 25.375, F.S., to provide statutory authorization for the Supreme Court to create a unique identifier for each person in order to identify all cases related to the same person or family, and to collect a portion of a person's social security number or other personal identification information solely for the purpose of case management and identification of related cases. The bill further provides that failure to provide a social security number for this purpose may not be grounds to deny any services, rights, or remedies otherwise provided by law.

### **Jurisdictional Conflicts/Precedence of Orders**

As the court system moves to implement measures to coordinate all related cases involving a single child or family, there appears to be a need to clarify the precedence of specified orders in subsequent legal proceedings. Since relief for matters such as custody, visitation, and support may arise through a number of different proceedings such as a dependency action, a dissolution of marriage action, and a paternity action, it is not uncommon for each court with respective jurisdiction of the proceedings to enter, without knowledge of the pending actions, an order ruling on the same matter. Issues arise as to which order should take precedence and under what circumstances, and whether the order will continue to take precedence should the dependency court terminate jurisdiction.

Another area of confusion and conflict is the continuing precedence of temporary orders on custody and visitation entered in domestic violence proceedings, over other such orders in other civil proceedings. Current law permits a court hearing a domestic violence injunction to include a determination on issues of custody, visitation, or support at the ex parte hearing and the final hearing, but that determination is entered only as a temporary order which suggests that a subsequent separate proceeding must be filed in order to secure a permanent order of custody, visitation, or support.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, it has been anecdotally suggested that this process is sometimes manipulated to allow one person to secure a determination on temporary custody and support at the ex parte hearing, before the court with the pending dissolution proceeding has had an opportunity to address custody and support issues. It has also been suggested that temporary orders on custody and support in the domestic violence injunction may then be inappropriately relied upon as permanent determinations of custody

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<sup>6</sup> See s. 119.0721, F.S., which deems all social security numbers held by an agency are confidential and exempt from statutory and constitutional public records requirements. Section 119.07(3)(ff), F.S., provides an exemption for a social security number that is included in a court file, unless redaction is requested. This exemption is only applicable until January 1, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> See s. 741.30(5)(a)3. and (6)(a)3., F.S.

and support without satisfying the full evidentiary burden required under a dissolution of marriage or paternity proceeding.

This bill amends ss. 39.013 and 39.521, F.S. to clarify that orders entered under chapter 39, Florida Statutes, which affect the placement of, access to, parental time with, or parental responsibility for a minor child shall take precedence over other orders entered in civil actions or proceedings. The bill also provides that if the dependency court terminates jurisdiction, the dependency order may be subsequently modified in any other civil action affecting the placement of, access to, parental time with, or parental responsibility for the same minor child.

The bill also amends s. 741.30, F.S., to clarify the continuing precedence of temporary orders relating to custody in domestic violence injunction proceedings. Such temporary orders shall remain effective until a determination of permanent custody is entered in a pending or subsequent civil proceeding affecting the placement of, access to, parental time with, or parental responsibility for the minor child.

### **Admissibility of Evidence**

The admissibility of evidence in civil and criminal proceedings, including workers' compensation proceedings, is generally governed by the Evidence Code set forth in chapter 90, F.S. However, the Legislature carved out an exception from the application of the Evidence Code to the admissibility of all orders and evidentiary matters in chapter 39, F.S. Therefore, current law prohibits their admissibility in any civil or criminal proceeding except under limited exceptions.<sup>8</sup> However, as the court system moves towards handling all related cases involving a single child or family, this provision may impede the court's decision-making ability to consider fully all matters relating to a single child or family, and may require unnecessary relitigation of the same facts or evidence in subsequent legal proceedings. The rationale is that if the evidence was admissible in an evidentiary hearing under chapter 39, it ought to have the same presumptive standard of reliability and relevance in a subsequent civil proceeding.<sup>9</sup>

This bill amends ss. 39.0132 and 39.814, F.S., to facilitate the admissibility of reliable and relevant evidence from a proceeding arising under chapter 39, F.S., to other civil proceedings affecting the same child or sibling of that child. In order to be admissible in a subsequent civil proceeding, the bill requires that notice be given to the opposing party of the intent to offer the evidence, that a copy of such evidence be delivered to the opposing party, and that the evidence is otherwise admissible in the subsequent proceeding. Confidentiality of the evidence is retained, and the evidence is not admissible in criminal proceedings, consistent with current law.<sup>10</sup>

### **Other miscellaneous provisions**

The bill also makes the following miscellaneous changes:

- Amends s. 61.13, F.S., to clarify that in any proceeding under chapter 61, the court may at any time order either or both parents who owe a duty of support to a child to pay support; the court's authority to order child support is not limited to dissolution of marriage actions.
- Amends s. 61.13, F.S., to remove the authority of the court to award grandparent visitation rights if in the best interests of the child. Such provision has been found unconstitutional.<sup>11</sup>
- Amends s. 61.21, F.S., to specify that a party has 45 days within which to complete a parenting course.

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<sup>8</sup> See ss. 39.0132 and 39.814, F.S. For example, a termination of parental rights orders may be admissible in a subsequent adoption proceeding of the same child or sibling. Records or portions of a dependency case may be admitted into perjury proceedings.

<sup>9</sup> See Senate Interim Report 2002-141, Report of Family Courts Division and the Model Family Court: Court Services and System, January 2002, at page 7.

<sup>10</sup> See ss. 39.0132(3),(4), and (6), F.S.

<sup>11</sup> See *Sullivan v. Sapp*, 2004 WL 62845, 29 Fla. L. Weekly S15 (Fla. Jan. 15, 2004), in which the Florida Supreme Court held that allowing an award of grandparent visitation based on the child's best interests, absent a showing of harm pursuant to s. 61.13(2)(b)2.b., F.S., is unconstitutional as a violation of the parent's constitutional right to privacy.

C. SECTION DIRECTORY:

Section 1 creates s. 25.375, F.S., to allow the Supreme Court to create a unique identifier for each person in order to identify all court cases related to that person or his or her family.

Sections 2 and 4 amend ss. 39.013 and 39.521, F.S., to provide that specified orders entered by a dependency court take precedence over orders entered in other civil proceedings.

Sections 3 and 5 amend ss. 39.0132 and 39.814, F.S., to provide that final orders entered by dependency courts pursuant to adjudicatory hearings are admissible in evidence in specified subsequent civil proceedings under specified circumstances.

Section 6 amends s. 61.13, F.S., to clarify that in proceedings under chapter 61, the court has jurisdiction to determine all matters relating to child support; and repeals language regarding grandparent visitation that has been found to be unconstitutional.

Section 7 amends s. 61.21, F.S., to specify the time frame for completing a parenting course.

Section 8 amends s. 741.30, F.S., providing that an order of temporary custody entered pursuant to a domestic violence injunction remains in effect until it expires, or a specified order is entered in a subsequent civil action.

Section 9 provides a severability clause.

Section 10 provides that the act shall take effect July 1, 2004.

**II. FISCAL ANALYSIS & ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT**

A. FISCAL IMPACT ON STATE GOVERNMENT:

1. Revenues:

The Office of the State Courts Administrator reports no apparent impact on state revenue.

2. Expenditures:

The Office of the State Courts Administrator reports no apparent impact on state expenditures.

B. FISCAL IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

None.

C. DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT ON PRIVATE SECTOR:

To the extent that this bill reduces the number of duplicative hearings and conflicting orders regarding the same family, families may experience cost savings on filing fees and attorneys fees.

D. FISCAL COMMENTS:

To the extent that this bill aides in the avoidance of conflicting orders relating to the same family, and prevents multiple court appearances by the same family on the same issues, it would appear that judicial resources would be maximized.

### III. COMMENTS

#### A. CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES:

##### 1. Applicability of Municipality/County Mandates Provision:

This bill does not affect county or municipal government.

##### 2. Other:

None.

#### B. RULE-MAKING AUTHORITY:

None.

#### C. DRAFTING ISSUES OR OTHER COMMENTS:

None.

### IV. AMENDMENTS/COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE CHANGES

It is expected that the bill sponsor will offer a strike-all amendment that does the following:

- On line 38 adds “a portion of” after the word ‘use’ to clarify that the court is only collecting and using a portion of the social security number, and not the whole number (which is confidential and exempt).
- On line 57, adds “, using the legal standards applicable in the subsequent proceedings” to clarify which legal standards should be used in subsequent proceedings.
- On lines 47, 56, 82, 217, 222, 364, and 384, adds ‘adoption of’ and changing the term ‘parental responsibilities’ to ‘parental rights and responsibilities’ to indicate that termination of parental rights proceedings and adoption proceedings are to be included in the list of proceedings over which the dependency order trumps and in which the dependency order could be admissible in evidence in subsequent proceedings.
- On lines 92 and 227 adds the word ‘and’ between sub-paragraphs 1. and 2. to ensure that evidence admitted in dependency proceedings is only admissible in other civil proceedings if that evidence is otherwise admissible.
- Removes section 4 from the bill, as all of the changes made in section 4 are also made in section 2, which amends s. 39.013, F.S., and which is applicable to all orders entered pursuant to chapter 39, F.S.
- On lines 239 – 242, amends those lines to read: ‘In a proceeding under this chapter, the court may at any time order either or both parents who owe a duty of support to a child to pay support in” to conform to s. 61.30(1)(a), F.S., which allows deviation from the support guidelines under specified conditions.
- On lines 301-308, repeals the entire paragraph as the second two sentences are predicated on language stricken by the bill.
- Repeals s. 61.13(7), F.S., giving grandparents equal standing as parents for evaluating custody arrangements, which has been found unconstitutional pursuant to *Richardson v. Richardson*, 766 So.2d 1036 (Fla. 2000).