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Tuesday, February 28, 2017

To: Members, Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety
From: Susan McMurray, AFSCME Council 32
Re: Support for SB 35 – mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect by juvenile correctional officers

AFSCME Council 32 supports this legislation, which adds juvenile correctional officers to the list of professionals who must report suspected abuse and neglect of children.

Our union represents youth counselors, teachers, mental health professionals and blue collar workers who work at Lincoln Hills School and Copper Lake School.

SB 35 will make it very clear that child abuse or neglect should be reported wherever and whenever it occurs. It will assure that all staff – including supervisors - will report any suspected abuse or neglect to the proper law enforcement authorities.

Unfortunately, in the not-so-distant past, many problems at LHS/CLS were hidden from view because administrators at those facilities strongly discouraged reporting of incidents to local law enforcement (and even to the DOC itself), as is required by law. This troubling trend has been deeply upsetting to the members who work at LHS/CLS as well as to our AFSCME leaders.

These LHS/CLS administrators who, thankfully, are gone, often forced front-line employees to downplay incidents. Their misguided priority was to prevent embarrassment for higher-ups about serious problems at the school.

Passage of Act 10 eliminated the true labor/management process, which gave workers a seat at the table and gave them the freedom to discuss concerns happening inside the school.

Act 10 also prompted an exodus of experienced staff and counselors from LHS/CLS. These changes led to short-staffing and a brutal cycle of forced overtime that stretched remaining staff to the breaking point.

As long as front-line workers fear reprisal for speaking out, they will be reluctant to do so. Nevertheless, we think SB 35 will help add clarity.

In an environment where correctional officers and staff have been stripped of their rights and protections, and where basic civil service protections have been gutted, the fear of reprisal for speaking out about workplace problems is very real, and remains dangerously chilling.

For the record, we opposed the decision in 2011 to close Ethan Allen School for Boys in Wales and Southern Oaks Girls School in Union Grove and moving the youth to LHS. AFSCME testified against the closure during meetings of the 2010 Governor's Commission on Juvenile Corrections Review Committee and recommended several alternatives to improving services to the youth offenders as well as dealing with the budget shortfall.

Thank you. If you have questions, feel free to contact me at smcmurray@afscme32.org.

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