

Older children's task force to meet Tuesday

By JoANNE YOUNG / Lincoln Journal Star

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A task force charged with coming up with legislation to deal with the problems of families with children in crisis convenes in Omaha on Tuesday for the first of three meetings.

The task force, made up of six state senators, will meet with a large working group of experts and health professionals in small groups, said Lincoln Sen. Amanda McGill, task force chairwoman. They will talk about barriers that keep families from getting the help they need and other issues important to children in crisis, she said.

In the afternoon, they will offer more specific suggestions about how to solve the problems and what legislation may be needed, she said.

Senators formed the task force after the state's safe haven law, initially passed with no age limitation for children, showed an underlying problem of access to mental and behavioral health services for older children and adolescents.

In the four months before the law changed to limit it to infants up to 30 days old, it was used in 27 cases for 36 youths, mostly adolescents whose parents or guardians said they were out of options to address their problems.

The Tuesday task force meeting is closed to the media, except for a brief opportunity to talk to people before the meeting starts and interviews with participants after it concludes. McGill said members of the working group would be more comfortable sharing their views without the media being present.

The task force working group will include healthcare professionals, hospital administrators, legal experts, juvenile court officials, officials of the Department of Health and Human Services, and others.

Arthur Pearlstein, director of Creighton University's Werner Institute for Negotiation and Dispute Resolution, will assist the group during all three sessions. Dr. Alan Tomkins and Nancy Shank of the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center will provide public policy support.

The members of the task force include McGill and Sens. Annette Dubas of Fullerton, Tim Gay of Papillion, Gwen Howard of Omaha, Dave Pankonin of Louisville, Arnie Stuthman of Platte Center, and Judiciary Committee chairman Brad Ashford of Omaha, as an ex officio member.

The meeting at Boys Town will begin at 9 a.m.

Reach JoAnne Young at 473-7228 or jyoung@journalstar.com.