

## **Summary of the Sound of Hope Act**

The Sound of Hope Act is designed to create a practical and supportive path for churches to engage in foster care, ensuring that children receive consistent, nurturing care without excessive bureaucratic requirements. Recognizing the historical role of faith-based organizations in child welfare, this Act seeks to leverage their community resources to provide stable environments for foster youth. By allowing churches to operate as congregational care facilities and establish child-placing agencies, the Act aims to reduce the risk of multiple placements and ensure continuity for children in the foster system.

The Act facilitates church-based foster care by enabling churches to establish foster care programs, including child-placing agencies, residential facilities, and adoption services, under a comprehensive care plan. It streamlines requirements by replacing traditional administrative roles with a team of leaders and mental health professionals, thereby reducing bureaucratic overhead.

Promoting stability and reunification is a key objective of the Act. It prioritizes reunification with the biological family, with foster families, referred to as "God families," supporting this process. Through a "God parent program," the Act fosters lasting relationships between the child, the foster family, and the biological family, providing long-term support and respite care.

Leveraging community resources is another important aspect of the Act. The program must utilize community resources collaboratively to meet the diverse needs of foster youth, including educational, medical, and psychological services. Each church-based facility is required to contract with third-party providers for additional mental and behavioral health services, while allowing churches to supplement with licensed professionals from their congregation.

Ensuring compliance and oversight, the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) will oversee the integration of church-based facilities, establishing guidelines and conducting periodic evaluations to ensure care standards are met. Churches will be eligible for state funding and reimbursement similar to other foster care programs, maintaining transparency and accountability.

Finally, the Act ensures non-discrimination and voluntary participation in religious activities. It fosters an accepting environment for all foster youth by making participation in religious activities voluntary.

The Sound of Hope Act aims to expand the capacity and capabilities of foster care services in Texas by engaging churches in providing residential care and support for foster youth. This initiative not only utilizes the extensive community reach of churches but also ensures professional oversight and compliance with child welfare standards. By promoting stability, leveraging community resources, and prioritizing reunification with biological families, the Act strives to provide a nurturing, stable environment for foster youth, reducing the risk of multiple placements and supporting the rehabilitation of biological families.