## STAFF REPORT

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| **Agenda Item:** | 7 | **Name:** | Scarlett Aldebot-Green |
| **Proposed No**.: | 2016-0267 | **Date:** | June 21, 2016 |

**SUBJECT**

A MOTION calling on the Executive to support efforts to increase the safety of infants and prevent child abandonment in King County through the development and implementation of a public information campaign to educate individuals on Washington’s safe haven law and on where and how to safely surrender a newborn.

**SUMMARY**

RCW 13.34.360 (WA’s safe haven law) allows a parent to, within seventy-two hours of a child’s birth, transfer his or her newborn to a qualified person at a hospital, fire station or federally designated rural health clinic. The surrendering individual may surrender the infant anonymously without fear of criminal prosecution for abandoning, or failing to support, the newborn.[[1]](#footnote-1) In 2014, Motion 14104 requested the Executive to convene a safety of newborn children task force by April 30, 2014. The task force was tasked with generating a report by October 30, 2014 with recommendations on 1) a public information campaign to educate service providers and the public about safe surrender of newborns, 2) improving data collection, and 3) the possibility of increasing the locations where newborns are permitted by state law to be safely surrendered. Motion 14275 acknowledged receipt of the taskforce’s report, *Safety of Newborn Children Task Force Report and Recommendations to the King County Council and the King County Executive*.[[2]](#footnote-2) That report made public education-specific recommendations. A minority report, submitted by Safe Place for Newborns of Washington,[[3]](#footnote-3) identified the lack of public knowledge of the law as a critical issue, the resolution of which should be prioritized.

Proposed Motion 2016-0267 requests that the Executive develop and implement a public information campaign to educate individuals of child-bearing age as well as service providers, county employees, and county partners of the safe haven law.

**BACKGROUND**

The Revised Code of Washington (RCW 13.34.360) states that within seventy-two hours of a child’s birth, a parent can transfer the newborn to a qualified person at a hospital, fire station or federally designated rural health clinic. WA’s safe haven law also provides that a parent can surrender the newborn anonymously and without fear of criminal prosecution for abandoning, or failing to support, the newborn.

In 2002, the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) was directed by the state to convene a task force to recommend methods of implementing the state law, including ways to educate the public, how funding might be obtained to do public education, ways to meet the medical and emotional needs of the mother, how to obtain medical histories, and developing model forms for hospitals and fire stations. The Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) maintains a web site with resources for the state safety of newborn children law. That website includes a downloadable packet of information for parents.

On February 12, 2014, the body of a newborn girl was found near the side of the road in North Bend wrapped in a blanket. The newborn was left less than half a mile away from Snoqualmie Valley Hospital, a location where infants can be safely and anonymously surrendered under Washington’s safe haven law. In March 2014, the King County Council passed a motion calling on the Executive to create an advisory task force to examine ways to improve implementation of the state safety of newborn children law in King County. The task force was convened in April 2014 and submitted a report to the Council in October 2014.

Motion 14275 acknowledged receipt of the taskforce’s report, *Safety of Newborn Children Task Force Report and Recommendations to the King County Council and the King County Executive*.[[4]](#footnote-4) That report made a range of recommendations relevant to Proposed Motion 2016-0267.

**Public education.** The task force noted that within King County, it is difficult for the public to find information about Washington’s safe haven law. It also highlighted that DSHS had limited resources on its website but that, within King County itself, there was little information on the law. The task force noted that agencies that regularly interact with pregnant mothers and families who may be at risk of abandoning their newborns lack information about the law. Agency interactions with these populations, the task force pointed out, are opportunities for greater public education. Specifically, the task force recommended that the County:

* Designate paid staff to oversee safe surrender project responsibilities;
* Leverage existing resources and partnerships for educating the public about WA’s safe surrender law and seek revenue opportunities;
* Utilize existing community resources and partnerships;
* Develop standardized training and brochures for educating providers, staff, and families served by their agencies, and people of influence, about the law;
* Work with ethnically and racially diverse groups to develop public education messaging that is culturally, religiously, and linguistically appropriate;
* Develop youth-centered public education messaging and marketing that uses popular culture and current technology, yet is also appropriate for culturally diverse audiences throughout King County;
* Incorporate information about the safe haven law into the current sexual education curriculum offered at public schools, colleges and universities, technical and trade schools, and the juvenile justice system.

**Diversity of audiences.** The task force noted that growing diversity in King County, which included a growing non-English-speaking population, could present linguistic and cultural barriers to a public education campaign and urged such a campaign to be sensitive to these issues.

**Limited funding.** In developing its recommendations, the task force recognized fiscal constraints.

A minority report, submitted by Safe Place for Newborns of Washington, accompanied the task force’s report. The minority report identified the lack of public knowledge of the law as a critical issue, the resolution of which should be prioritized over other recommendations.

Data on the number of abandoned newborns in King County is difficult to pin down. The County has limited ability to collect data. Per the WA safe haven law, DSHS collects data from qualifying, receiving locations within 24 hours of receiving an infant under conditions that meet the requirements of WA’s safe haven law. Staff could not locate any aggregate available data on the number of infants who are abandoned under conditions that do not meet the RCW. In 2013, DSHS received no reports from King County of infants that had been abandoned under RCW 13.34.360. Staff has sent an inquiry for the same data for 2014, 2015 and the first half of 2016. Recently, in March 2016, a newborn was found in an Everett, Washington trash compactor. That newborn was found less than one half of a mile from a fire station where newborns can be safely surrendered under WA’s safe haven law.

**ANALYSIS**

Proposed Motion 2016-0267 requests that the Executive develop and implement a public information campaign to educate individuals of child-bearing age, service providers who may come into contact with individuals of child-bearing age, county employees and county partners about the provisions of the safe haven law, the places where a newborn may be safely surrendered by a parent, and a phone number that individuals may call to obtain information on where to safely surrender a newborn.

Proposed Motion 2016-0267 requests that the campaign seek to:

* **Produce and disseminate simple educational materials** for county workers that contain information about the safe haven law with an emphasis on county workers who may come into contact with would-be parents, including employees of Public Health – Seattle & King County. Additionally, the proposed motion calls on the Executive to:
  + Collaborate with relevant partners, county departments and Safe Place for Newborns of Washington to:
    - Select materials
    - Determine how to disseminate materials
  + Ensure materials include clearly displayed information about where and to whom parents can surrender a newborn, and contact information, such as a toll-free number, where individuals obtain more information
  + Produce materials in multiple languages.

This provision is consonant with the recommendations of the Safety of Newborn Children Task Force. While the Proposed Motion does not specifically note leveraging existing materials, it does not prohibit it and requires collaboration. While the proposed motion does not address the task force’s concerns about inaccessibility of public education materials due to cultural barriers, it does address linguistic barriers.

* **Provide education to county workers** on how to disseminate information to would-be parents.

This provision is consonant with the recommendations of the Safety of Newborn Children Task Force.

* **Disseminate information on the safe haven law** at King County facilities and locations where would-be parents might see the information.

This provision is consonant with the recommendations of the Safety of Newborn Children Task Force. However, it limits the scope of dissemination contemplated by the task force in its recommendations.

* **Explore partnership opportunities** with entities external to King County government.

This provision is consonant with the recommendations of the Safety of Newborn Children Task Force.

* **Transmit to the Council** by December 15, 2016 a report on the status of implementation of the campaign including:
  + The date on which the campaign was or is expected to be in place;
  + A list of County departments and divisions that will receive educational materials and training;
  + A list of locations that will display or disseminate the materials or information;
  + A list of partners that will display or otherwise disseminate the materials or information;
  + Information on the plan for ensuring that the outreach campaign occurs on an ongoing basis.

While the precise scope of the campaign including selection of materials, production of materials, training and dissemination are left at the discretion of the Executive, staff anticipate the County could incur some costs related to the campaign. The Proposed Motion makes no provisions in relation to the task force’s recommendation to fund a designated project administrator to oversee safe surrender project activities. Ensuring the campaign occurs on an ongoing basis may prove challenging depending on the capacity of the Department or Division charged with implementation absent additional resources. Staff has no specific information on cost estimates or capacity at this time.

**INVITEES**

1. Maria Wood, Board of Health Administrator, PHSKC

**ATTACHMENTS**

1. Proposed Motion 2016-0267

1. Provided the newborn is brought in unharmed from abuse or neglect. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2014-RPT0153 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.safeplacefornewbornswa.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 2014-RPT0153 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)