Authors say code will benefit children

By JOHN LaPLANTE
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Authors of a proposed “children’s code” say their five-year effort to get a handle on state laws affecting juveniles should also help improve government services to children and their families.

The 600-page document, if approved by the Legislature, brings together the hodge-podge of child-related statutes now scattered all over state law books.

But the code would do far more than just make it easier for judges and lawyers to find appropriate laws, legislators were told Thursday.

It also can serve as an easy-to-read instruction manual for everyone in law and government who deals with children, said LSU Law professor Lucy McGough, coordinator of the project begun in 1986.

“This is a code that’s used by people — policemen, social workers, all sorts of professionals who are not legally trained,” McGough said.

The code also reconciles ambiguous and inconsistent laws — such as the three current legal definitions of abuse, she said.

A single source of legal information could help improve services to children and their families by bringing together all the agencies that deal with children’s and families’ problems, McGough said.

“We’re trying to save families before it’s too late,” she said. Often, she said, a teen-ager who gets in trouble with the law has problems that can be traced back to family dilemmas diagnosed years earlier by a social service agency.

Under the one significant piece of new law proposed in the code, courts will bring together professionals from several agencies to address several facets of a child’s problem, McGough said.

“Current procedures produce a tunnel vision by focusing upon the child rather than the family as a unit, and intervention comes too late with too few resources,” she said.

A special legislative subcommittee, briefed on the code Thursday, heaped praise on the panel of lawyers, judges, prosecutors, social workers and others who wrote it.
"I have no doubt it will be well-received by the Legislature. This is a very desirable change," said Sen. Fritz Windhorst, R-Gretna.

Lawmakers must approve the code before it becomes part of state law. However, Windhorst and others asked whether the code will require spending more money on juvenile courts and other government agencies dealing with children.

The code itself will require no additional funds, McGough said. In fact, she said, it should allow government officials to better use available funds by ending some duplication of services.

Rep. Raymond Jetson, D-Baton Rouge, was among the lawmakers expressing hope that the code will improve state services to minors.

"Let's hope that, at the end, the children will truly benefit," he said.

The project was prompted by the increasingly complex network of laws governing juvenile justice.

"The jurisdiction of the juvenile courts has come to resemble a contraption out of a Rube Goldberg cartoon: a few cogs here and there, a flywheel or so, gizmos and widgets, each legislatively tacked on with thought only of keeping the machinery running for the time being," McGough said in a statement to the committee.

The major work of the study panel was to draft "a single code which would encompass all of the relevant laws and make them more accessible to counsel, courts and all professionals charged with their implementation."