



**House
Legislative
Analysis
Section**

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NEIGHBORHOOD SAFE HOUSES

House Bill 4097 (Substitute H-2)
First Analysis (3-15-89)

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Sponsor: Rep. Bill Martin
Committee: Judiciary

Mich. State Law Library

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

Many communities have neighborhood programs that identify homes where children can find help or safety in an emergency. A child being followed by a strange adult or threatened by a bully can find refuge in a neighborhood home displaying a distinctive sign in the window. These "safe house" programs commonly are promoted in local schools in cooperation with local law enforcement agencies. Community Child Watch, Helping Hand, and the McGruff House programs are among the better known programs.

The current state of affairs, however, has been criticized for its lack of uniformity. The existence of various programs across the state means that a child who is visiting from out of town or who has recently moved to a neighborhood might be unfamiliar with the sign used by the local program, and might fail to recognize a safe house in an emergency. It has been suggested that statewide standards for safe houses be adopted.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The bill would create a new public act to establish standards and oversight for neighborhood "safe houses," that is, neighborhood homes where children can seek emergency help. A safe house would be designated by a standard sign and occupied by a responsible adult who had passed a background check conducted by the local law enforcement agency.

Local programs. A neighborhood safe house program could be sponsored by a local law enforcement agency, or a school district or local nonprofit organization in cooperation with a local law enforcement agency. The law enforcement agency would conduct a background check on each person applying to have his or her home designated a safe house, and on each adult residing in the home. The program sponsor would supply a numbered sign bearing the standard neighborhood safe house symbol to an applicant who passed the background check and agreed in writing to follow the terms of the program. Signs would be the property of the local law enforcement agency, and would have to be returned to the agency if the sponsor determined that a person's home no longer qualified as a safe house. A sponsor would keep a register of its safe houses.

State Police duties. In cooperation with the Michigan Sheriffs' Association and the Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police, the Department of State Police would: develop program guidelines; adopt a standard safe house symbol and sign, and a model application form for safe house designation; publicize the program and make information available to potential sponsors; and cooperate with local law enforcement agencies in their background checks on persons applying to have their homes designated as safe houses. The department would make safe house signs available at cost to local law enforcement agencies. The department could promulgate rules to implement the bill.

Standard safe house signs. The standard safe house sign adopted by the State Police would have to be one that was easily seen from a distance and not easily reproduced. Signs provided to local law enforcement agencies would be numbered. Symbols being used by safe house programs in existence when the bill took effect could continue to be used for two years after the bill's effective date.

Penalties. It would be a misdemeanor for a person to display a standard safe house symbol from his or her home unless the home had been approved by a program sponsor. It also would be a misdemeanor to fail to return a safe house sign when one's home no longer qualified under the program.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

Fiscal information is not available at present. (3-14-89)

ARGUMENTS:

For:

The bill would ensure that safe house programs across the state employ the same symbol, so that any child might easily recognize a safe house regardless of where he or she was in the state. The additional safeguards provided by the bill — police background checks, nonreproducibility of signs, numbered and registered signs — are features of the nationally known McGruff House program, which several states have adopted as their sole safe house program. While the importance of background checks on residents of prospective safe houses is obvious, it is also important to ensure that houses which are not part of the program are not identified by false signs, something which does occasionally happen. The McGruff program uses a five-color poster picturing McGruff, the crime dog—the trench-coated cartoon character used in crime prevention advertisements. Thus, unlike programs that use simpler signs like the silhouette of a hand, the McGruff sign cannot be easily copied and improperly used.

The McGruff program has the further advantage of maintaining a national registry of signs, so that if a sign turns up somewhere, it can be traced back to the program and the house to which it was assigned. Finally, the McGruff character is one that children have seen on television and had visit their schools; the character is already a recognizable symbol of safety for most children. House Concurrent Resolution 29, adopted by both the House and the Senate this year, designates the McGruff crime dog as the official symbol for homes participating in the neighborhood safe house program; the bill would provide the statutory framework for statewide implementation of the McGruff safe house program.

Against:

Several safe house programs other than McGruff are operating and expanding successfully in the state, so it is unclear why the state needs to mandate the use of the

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McGruff program. Existing programs employ simple graphics, such as a silhouette of a hand or a watchful eye, that even very small children can recognize at a distance. Photocopies of these signs look like the rough copies they are, and falsely identified safe houses are often spotted and reported in short order. Rather than confuse children by requiring that familiar symbols and signs be replaced with new ones, the state should leave well enough alone.

Response: The bill offers a two-year phase-in period before existing symbols would have to be replaced with the statewide symbol.

POSITIONS:

The Department of State Police supports the bill. (3-14-89)

The Michigan Sheriffs Association supports the bill as reported from committee. (3-14-89)

The Michigan State Police Troopers Association supports the bill. (3-14-89)

The Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police takes no position on the bill. (3-14-89)