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Governor Crist Praises New Protections for Vulnerable Floridians

~ Enhanced background screenings for care providers of elderly, children and persons with disabilities to begin August 1 ~

TALLAHASSEE – Governor Charlie Crist today applauded new enhanced background screening procedures for individuals who work with vulnerable Floridians, such as children, senior citizens and persons with disabilities. To prepare for the law becoming effective on August 1, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) launched a Web site providing information on the new requirements. The Agency for Health Care Administration (AHCA) also maintains a Web site and is working with associations and providers to ensure they understand that all background screening requests must be submitted electronically through a vendor approved through the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

“The safety, security and well-being of children, elders and persons with disabilities is of the utmost importance, which is why we must be absolutely sure that those entrusted with their care are trustworthy and responsible,” said Governor Crist. “I am confident enhanced screening measures of those who work with these vulnerable populations is an added protection that will enhance public safety statewide.”

House Bill 7069, signed by Governor Crist earlier this year, requires employees to pass both a state and federal fingerprint screening, equivalent to a level 2 background check, before beginning work with elderly, children and persons with disabilities in certain care settings. Health care employees working in residential or home care settings must have a Level 2 screening before having contact with clients, or having access to client property, funds or living areas.

DCF's Web site, www.dcfbackgroundscreening.com, provides clarifying details about who needs to be screened, how to contact DCF regional coordinators, and answers to frequently asked questions.

“We must help our front-line care providers understand the significant changes that will transform their day-to-day business operations,” said DCF Secretary George Sheldon. “The Web site is a helpful tool to help answer questions about how this new law will better protect our most vulnerable citizens.”

The legislation also requires that fingerprints be submitted in an electronic format to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement by July 1, 2012. Electronic fingerprints go into effect for providers licensed by AHCA and DCF as of August 1, 2010.

“We are focused on helping providers hire the right staff quickly and efficiently to ensure they can provide necessary care to their clients,” said AHCA Secretary Thomas W. Arnold. “The electronic processing of fingerprints will expedite this process while providing important protections for those who need their services.”

AHCA's Web site, http://ahca.myflorida.com/MCHQ/Long_Term_Care/Background_Screening/index.shtml provides similar information regarding who must be screened, as well as those vendors available to process electronic fingerprints. AHCA has also contracted with Cogent Systems as an option to provide electronic fingerprinting services. Cogent Systems is a leading provider of Automated Fingerprint Identification Systems. It has statewide locations and will expand to additional sites by August 1, 2010. However, health care providers have the flexibility to choose any vendor or conduct their own electronic scanning in accordance with FDLE standards. For more information regarding background screening electronic fingerprint options, visit the FDLE site at <http://www.fdle.state.fl.us/Content/getdoc/04833e12-3fc6-4c03-9993-379244e0da50/livescan.aspx>.

The law also contains other safeguards such as requiring some former felons to wait three years before applying for an exemption and working with these populations. Additionally, it gives select executive agency heads the authority to revoke and deny these exemptions for certain disqualifying offenses. It also prevents anyone designated as a sexual predator, sexual offender or career offender from being able to get an exemption to work with these vulnerable citizens.

In October 2009, Governor Crist convened select state agencies charged with reviewing legal requirements for screening individuals who provide care to children, the elderly and persons with disabilities to review current background-screening policies. The group's findings were presented to the Governor in November 2009 and then presented to the Florida Legislature for consideration. The new legislation reflects the recommendations of the group.

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