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YOUTH EMPLOYMENT EXCEPTION: HOCKEY REFEREES

House Bill 4815 as introduced
First Analysis (7-3-97)

Sponsor: Rep. Paul Tesanovich
Committee: Labor and Occupational
Safety

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

Ice hockey has seen an unprecedented explosion in interest in recent years. Many hockey associations have been formed around the state that offer men's and women's leagues and children's house and travel leagues, in addition to the club and varsity programs offered by many high schools. For children's programs, hockey associations typically offer two levels of competition -- house and travel -- with travel programs being much more competitive and demanding. Teams are assigned according to age categories and are typically designated as Mite I and II, Squirt, PeeWee, Bantam, Midgets, and Juniors, with Mites composed of the youngest players (about 6-7) and so on. Reportedly, some hockey programs, especially those in rural areas, are having difficulty finding enough people to officiate the children's hockey games. To officiate, an official must have not only a knowledge of the game and its rules, but also be able to ice skate. A written exam must be passed, and a minimum level of skills on the ice demonstrated. Officials are also classified by levels. A first year referee is designated as a Level I official, Level II is a second and third year referee, and a level III official has more than three years of experience. Level IV officials have to pass an additional closed book exam and videotaped ice drill to test their skating abilities. Level I and II officials are typically assigned to officiate at the lower level games (Mite and Squirt), with the higher level officials officiating the higher level games, men's league, and high school games. Since many children begin playing competitive hockey as young as six years old, some feel that by the age of ten, some children possess the necessary ice skating skills and knowledge of the game to adequately officiate the lower level games. However, the Youth Employment Standards Act sets the minimum age for employment of minors at fourteen years old, with exemptions for caddies (11 years) and certain farm workers (13 years). Since hockey officials are a paid position, legislation has been proposed to create an exemption for children at least ten years of age to act as hockey referees.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The Youth Employment Standards Act sets the minimum age for employment of minors at fourteen years old. The act contains two exceptions to this rule: minors 11 years old or older may work as golf caddies, and those 13 years old or older may be employed in certain farming operations. House Bill 4815 would add a third exception to the act to allow a minor who was 10 years old or older to work as a hockey referee.

MCL 409.103

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

Fiscal information is not available.

ARGUMENTS:

For:

The growth in the popularity of hockey has resulted in the expansion of many hockey programs to such a degree that some areas in the state are finding difficulty in employing enough officials to adequately staff all the levels of play. In particular, there is a shortage of available referees to officiate the lower levels of play, which primarily involve players between the ages of six to eight years of age. According to a representative from USA Hockey, a national governing body for players and referees, some states do employ children under 14 years of age as hockey officials for the lower level games. At least one state allows children as young as nine to officiate at hockey games. Of course, some ten and eleven year olds are not mature enough to act as hockey officials. However, many ten year olds already have four to five years of hockey experience as a player, and, if in a proper mentoring environment, are very successful as hockey referees. It is argued that officiating a hockey game is a great activity to learn responsibility and develop leadership and communication skills. Many very successful officials are 15 to 16 years old who have three

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or four years of officiating experience and who display much enthusiasm and dedication in officiating the lower level games. Also, the decision making skills needed to be a referee are not that different than what are needed as a hockey player -- hockey is a fast moving, emotional game where players must exercise good judgment in a myriad of situations. Besides, the act already permits 11 year olds to caddy and 13 year olds to do farm work, and the bill would only allow, not require, hockey associations to hire younger children. With the proper guidance, there is no reason that a mature 10 or 11 year old could not successfully act as a hockey referee.

Response:

If children as young as 10 years old are to be allowed to officiate in hockey games, then perhaps they should also be allowed to do the same for other sports.

Against:

Unlike being a caddy, which primarily involves carrying around a set of clubs and helping a golfer to find his or her golf ball, hockey is a very stressful and emotional sport chock full of judgment calls. A hockey referee is responsible for deciding if a puck really has crossed the goal line, deciding if all players have adequate safety equipment, calling infractions properly and assigning penalties, and suspending play if there are unsafe ice conditions. In short, the referee has the final say on interpreting the activities of the game -- which has a very direct bearing on the game's outcome. Many question whether ten year olds (and indeed those under 14, in general) possess the maturity necessary to make the sheer number of decisions called for in a typical game, and to withstand the animosity and vociferousness of irate parents and coaches over a controversial call. Can a child so young stick to his or her guns in the face of adult challenges, and still make accurate calls on the next controversial play? Some are concerned that lowering the minimum age for hockey referees is just another example of children being placed in situations where they have to grow up too fast. Children 14 and older are much more capable of dealing with the pressure of outside forces than a child of ten to twelve. Also, some have expressed concerns as to whether a younger child would have the stamina needed to skate hard for several hours, as the lower level games are typically 50 minutes in duration and referees usually officiate two or three games in a row.

Also, though according to USA Hockey there have been many successful referees under the age of 14, the success stories have apparently come out of programs that have a strong mentoring environment where the younger referees are assigned and scheduled to work with older, experienced officials. If the impetus behind the bill is to qualify more individuals to work the lower level games because of staff shortages, the bill simply would not

successfully meet the need, as there probably would not be enough older, experienced referees to be paired with the younger children. The consensus appears to be that the success comes not from the young child being on his or her own to call the shots, but to be working side by side with an experienced referee that the younger child can learn from and be trained by.

POSITIONS:

USA Hockey, a governing body for players and referees, is supportive of younger people officiating in a mentoring environment. (7-2-97)

The Mid-Michigan Referee Association opposes the bill. (7-2-97)

Analyst: S. Stutzky

■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.