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Governor signs four bills at mission, Arlington appeal make for private welfare role

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Author: Jeff Prince, Star-Telegram Writer

ARLINGTON - Citing disillusionment with the welfare system, Gov. George W. Bush visited Mission Arlington yesterday and signed four bills that encourage faith-based organizations to expand social services by eliminating some government restrictions

Then he turned and offered his pen as a gift to Mission Arlington's director, Tillie Burgin, whom he earlier had hugged and dubbed the "Mother Teresa of Arlington. " "The welfare system of today has failed," Bush said. "In order to have a compassionate tomorrow, it has become clear to me and clear to the state of Texas that we must encourage compassionate people to become involved in the delivery of help to people who need help. I envision places such as Mission Arlington all over the state of Texas. " One of the bills shields donors from legal liability when offering medical devices such as crutches and wheelchairs to a nonprofit health-care organization so that those organizations can provide free or reduced-cost health care. Burgin said donations such as these have long been provided to Mission Arlington but the new law could increase the amount of help offered.

Dr. Bob Mann of Arlington has offered crutches, medication and medical instruments for years without regard for liability.

Mann agreed that the new law could increase donations.

"It will take the pressure off not just individuals like us but companies that manufacture this stuff and have used or damaged stuff that they might otherwise destroy," Mann said.

The other bills exempt faith-based non-medical drug and alcohol treatment programs from being licensed by the state; allow child-care providers and child placing agencies to be accredited by recognized, private-sector entities instead of being licensed by the state; and encourage law enforcement agencies to use faith-based programs to help criminal offenders turn their lives around.

"For far too long, government has excluded churches and synagogues from the delivery of welfare," Bush said. "This is going to change in the state of Texas. " The intent of the bills is to increase private-sector involvement rather than to remove government from social services, the governor said.

The nonprofit, faith-based, volunteer-oriented Mission Arlington is an ideal example of how independent organizations can improve the lives of needy people without relying on the government, Bush said.

"I can't think of a better place to sign these bills than at Mission Arlington, which is a beacon for all people of faith to follow," Bush said.

Mission Arlington distributes food and clothing, provides job training and oversees a child-care center and an adult day services center. Burgin has directed the mission for more than 10 years, earning respect from clients, volunteers, supporters and city officials for her leadership.

"Government can be a part of the process," Bush said. "Government can send funds. Government can provide people with vouchers. But government must realize that compassion flows from the hearts and souls of our fellow Texans. For those who want to help, come aboard.

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