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Voucher issues ripple far

Vanderbilt panelist urges lawmakers to focus on goals, best use of money

By Lisa Fingeroot
The Tennessean

When deciding whether to support Gov. Bill Haslam's school voucher proposal, state lawmakers will need to consider if ultimately allowing 20,000 students to take advantage of

vouchers is really the best use of public money, a Vanderbilt University professor said Thursday. Voucher plans that allow public money to be spent on private school tuition usually create more questions than answers, professor Claire Smre-

kar said Thursday during a panel discussion sponsored by the League of Women Voters in collaboration with Vanderbilt's Peabody College. The decision is complex and depends on the goal, whether the plan can meet the goal, and whether it is a good use of public money, she added. If, for example, the goal is to help poor students in under-performing schools, officials might decide the money would be bet-

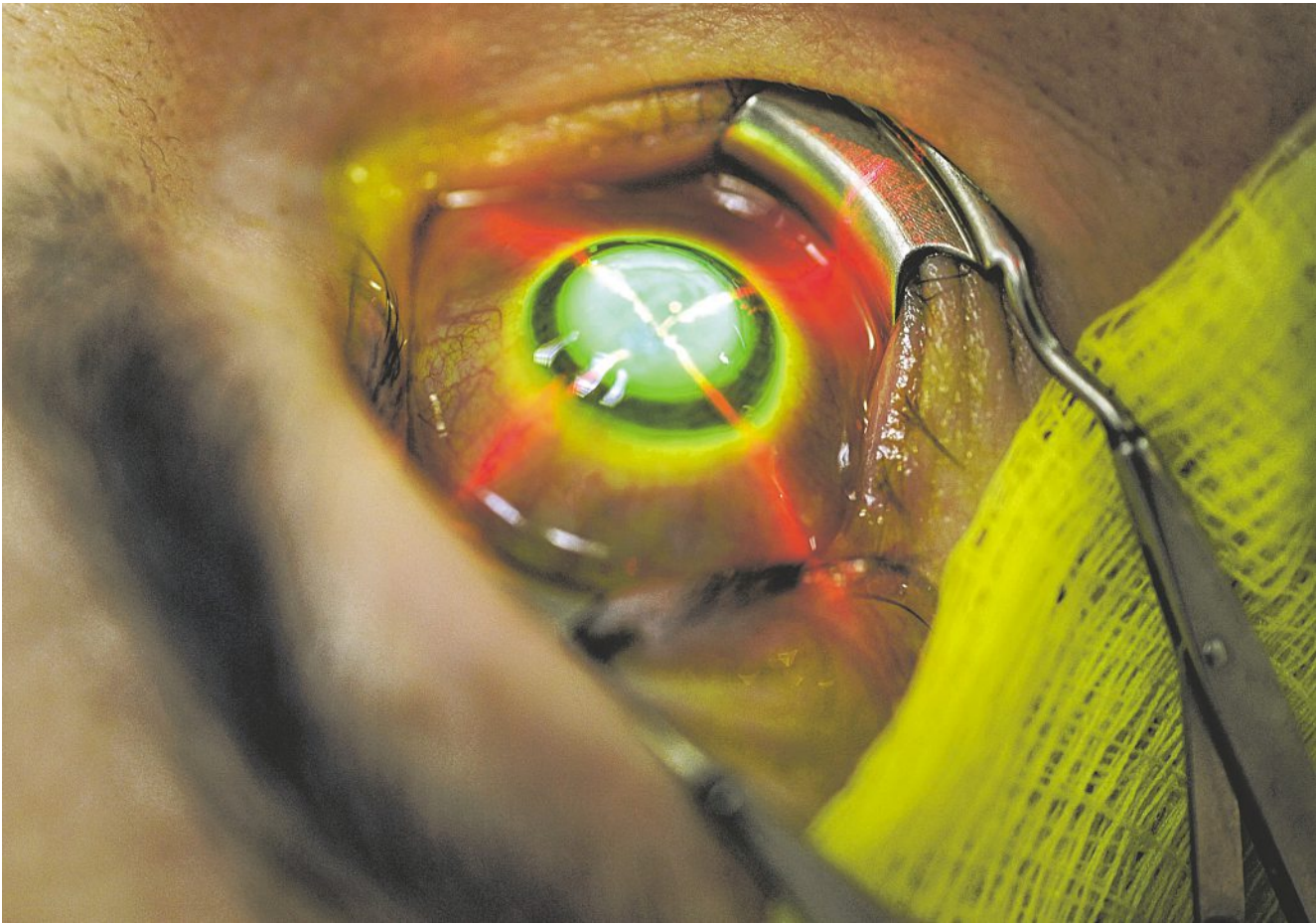
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ter spent on economic development and an array of public school choices. Smrekar would not give a personal opinion on the pending Tennessee proposal.

The plan Haslam announced in late January, the Tennessee Choice & Opportunity Scholarship Act, would give vouchers to as many as 5,000 students across the state to use in the next school year. By fall 2016, that number would increase to 20,000. To be eligible, kids would have to be attending a school ranked in the bottom 5 percent

» VOUCHERS, 2B

ADVANCES IN VISION



Dr. Ming Wang uses a new machine that fixes a type of eye problem with corneal cross-linking. Wang is performing eye surgery on Sean Leonard. PHOTOS BY SHELLEY MAYES / THE TENNESSEAN

Eye study offers hope for discharged sailor

Experimental therapy uses vitamin, UV light to treat sagging corneas

By Tom Wilemon
The Tennessean

Chris Clinard is counting on a new treatment for vision loss to give him a second chance at a career in the U.S. Navy. The 18-year-old from Clarksville, Tenn., was 2½ weeks into basic training when a military ophthalmologist determined he had keratoconus, a diagnosis that led to a medical discharge. His cornea, the transparent film that covers and protects the eye, had thinned and begun to sag, causing vision distortions that would worsen. "I'm kind of happy that the Navy did find it," Clinard said. The timing was fortunate because he was able to enroll in a clinical trial of a treatment to strengthen corneas with vitamin blasts and ultraviolet light. The treatment, called accelerated cross-linking, is done with a surgical device called the Avedro KXL system. He received the treatment in his left eye in December and will undergo another round in his right eye this spring at Wang Vision 3D Cataract & Lasik



Dr. Ming Wang participates in a clinical trial of a treatment to strengthen corneas with vitamin blasts and ultraviolet light. The treatment is called accelerated cross-linking.

"I'm kind of happy that the Navy did find (the vision disorder)."

CHRIS CLINARD
Study participant



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Child abuse task force pushes for consistency

Suggestions also include better collection of data, joint training, fairer system

By Tony Gonzalez
The Tennessean

A dozen highly detailed recommendations for ways to better protect Tennessee's children were delivered in a report to lawmakers last week, but whether they'll trigger improvements isn't as clear as in years past. The findings of the Joint Task Force on Children's Justice/Child Sexual Abuse suggest many changes that need the backing of the recently reorganized Tennessee General Assembly, where some reassigned lawmakers are still coming up to speed on child and family issues. The 100-page report seeks more statewide consistency in child protection and suggests ways that the key players in child welfare—including law enforcement, health providers and the Department of Children's Services—can work together better. "I hope there will be a serious look at (the report) and some recognition of the involvement," said Bonnie Beneke, task force chairwoman and executive director of Tennessee Children's Advocacy Centers. "These are people from all across the state, from all different professions. ... They've taken it very seriously and want others to take it seriously and to work with us as we move forward."



Aaron

About 40 people, including doctors, attorneys and DCS employees, make up the task force, created by lawmakers in 1985. The group often spurs changes—in laws, DCS policies and methods for investigating abuse and caring for children. But whom the report speaks to this year remains somewhat unclear because of the legislative reordering, say Beneke and Carla Aaron, DCS executive director for child safety and a task force member. Aaron said DCS doesn't have formal discussions about the report scheduled with lawmakers, but she's "poised to talk about it." DCS has already taken action on some ideas, Aaron said. As detailed in the first half of the report, last year's task force recommendations led to new child protection train-

» DCS, 6B



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Gov. Bill Haslam blamed media outlets for the high bill. GEORGE WALKER IV / THE TENNESSEAN

Haslam: Fee for DCS records will stand

He blames \$55K tab on legal costs from media lawsuit

By Chas Sisk
The Tennessean

Gov. Bill Haslam suggested his administration would not back away from its \$55,000 tab to produce records from the Department of Children's Services, even after the agency's new leader said the estimate seemed "a little high." Haslam said during and after a luncheon appearance Thurs-

day before the Tennessee Press Association that news organizations brought the issue on themselves by refusing to drop their suit calling for disclosure of the case files of children who have died after being brought to the attention of child welfare workers. The records have not yet been made public, and no organization has been billed for their release, Haslam said. He dismissed a suggestion that, as governor, he could decide himself to waive or reduce the fees. "That's what the chancellor will determine," Haslam said. "Should we waive it for every-

thing that comes down the road?" Davidson County Chancery Court Judge Carol McCoy ruled last month that DCS must release the forms its employees fill out when a child dies, and she said the department must provide redacted copies of all files on children who die. The ruling came in response to a lawsuit filed by The Tennessean and joined by other media outlets in the state seeking greater access to records on child fatalities. McCoy said the records should be public under state law and ruled that the state must pay newspapers' court

costs for pursuing the case. Haslam referred to those legal expenses and blamed media outlets for the high bill, saying they could have narrowed their request. He said lawyers for the plaintiffs refused to settle the case before it went to court. "There was a corporate decision made to go to trial on this," Haslam said. "The chancellor came in and what she said, we're fine with. She's the one that said tell us what it will cost. It's in her seat." Lauran Sturm, an attorney for the Waller law firm who

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