



Substitute House Bill No. 5004

Public Act No. 26-26

**AN ACT CONCERNING CHILD WELFARE ACCOUNTABILITY AND
TRANSPARENCY.**

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Assembly convened:

Section 1. Section 17a-114 of the 2026 supplement to the general statutes is repealed and the following is substituted in lieu thereof (*Effective October 1, 2026*):

(a) As used in this section, (1) "approval" or "approved" means that a person has been approved to adopt or provide foster care by a child-placing agency licensed pursuant to section 17a-149, (2) "licensed" means a person holds a license to provide foster care issued by the Department of Children and Families, (3) "fictive kin caregiver" means a person who is twenty-one years of age or older and who is unrelated to a child by birth, adoption or marriage but who has an emotionally significant relationship with such child or such child's family amounting to a familial relationship, and (4) "emergency placement" means the placement of a child by the Department of Children and Families in the home of a relative or fictive kin caregiver as a result of the sudden unavailability of such child's primary caretaker.

(b) (1) No child in the custody of the Commissioner of Children and Families shall be placed in foster care with any person, unless (A) (i)

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

such person is licensed for such purpose by the department or the Department of Developmental Services pursuant to the provisions of section 17a-227, (ii) such person's home is approved by a child-placing agency licensed by the commissioner pursuant to section 17a-149, or (iii) such person has received approval as provided in this section, and (B) on and after January 1, 2017, for a child twelve years of age or older, such child has received a foster family profile in accordance with the provisions of section 17a-114e. For the purposes of this section, any prospective adoptive parent shall be licensed by the department. Upon the denial of an initial license, the department shall disclose to the applicant, in writing, the reason for such denial. Any applicant denied an initial license by the department may appeal such denial to the commissioner, in a form and manner prescribed by the commissioner, not later than thirty days after such denial. Not later than sixty days after the making of such appeal, the commissioner shall grant such license or affirm such denial in writing. The commissioner shall adopt regulations, in accordance with the provisions of chapter 54, to establish the licensing procedures and standards.

(2) (A) Except as provided in subparagraph (B) of this subdivision, the commissioner shall require each applicant for licensure or approval pursuant to this section and any person eighteen years of age or older living in the household of such applicant to submit to state and national criminal history records checks prior to issuing a license or approval to such applicant to accept placement of a child for purposes of foster care or adoption. Such criminal history records checks shall be conducted in accordance with section 29-17a. The commissioner shall check the (i) state child abuse and neglect registry established pursuant to section 17a-101k for the name of such applicant and for the name of any person eighteen years of age or older living in the household of such applicant, and (ii) child abuse and neglect registry in any state in which such applicant or person resided in the preceding five years for the name of such applicant or person.

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

(B) If an applicant for licensure or approval or any person eighteen years of age or older living in the household of such applicant has submitted to the state and national criminal history records checks described in subsection (c) of this section within the previous twelve-month period, the commissioner shall not require such applicant or person to submit to the state and national criminal history records checks described in subparagraph (A) of this subdivision in connection with the issuance of a license or approval.

(3) The commissioner shall require each individual licensed or approved pursuant to this section and any person eighteen years of age or older living in the household of such individual to submit to state and national criminal history records checks prior to renewing a license or approval for any individual providing foster care or adopting. Such criminal history records checks shall be conducted in accordance with section 29-17a. Prior to such renewal, the commissioner shall check the (A) state child abuse and neglect registry established pursuant to section 17a-101k for the name of such applicant and for the name of any person eighteen years of age or older living in the household of such applicant, and (B) child abuse and neglect registry in any state in which such applicant or person resided in the preceding five years for the name of such applicant or person.

(4) The commissioner shall comply with any request to check the child abuse and neglect registry established pursuant to section 17a-101k made by the child welfare agency of another state.

(c) (1) Notwithstanding the requirements of subsection (b) of this section, the commissioner [may] shall make an emergency placement of a child with a relative or fictive kin caregiver who has not been issued a license or approval, [when] if such emergency placement is in the best interests of the child, provided a satisfactory home visit is conducted and a basic assessment of the family is completed. When the commissioner makes such an emergency placement, the commissioner

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

shall (A) request a criminal justice agency to perform a federal name-based criminal history search of such relative or fictive kin caregiver and each person eighteen years of age or older residing in the home, and (B) check the state child abuse and neglect registry established pursuant to section 17a-101k for the name of such relative or fictive kin caregiver and each person eighteen years of age or older residing in the home. The results of such name-based search shall be provided to the commissioner.

(2) Not later than ten calendar days after a name-based search is performed pursuant to subdivision (1) of this subsection, the commissioner shall request the State Police Bureau of Identification to perform a state and national criminal history records checks of such relative or fictive kin caregiver and each person eighteen years of age or older residing in the home, in accordance with section 29-17a. Such criminal history records checks shall be deemed as required by this section for the purposes of section 29-17a and the commissioner may request that such criminal history records checks be performed in accordance with subsection (c) of said section. The results of such criminal history records checks shall be provided to the commissioner. If any person refuses to provide fingerprints or other positive identifying information for the purposes of such criminal history records checks when requested, the commissioner shall immediately remove the child from the home.

(3) If the commissioner denies an emergency placement with a relative or fictive kin caregiver or removes a child from such home based on the results of a federal name-based criminal history search performed pursuant to subdivision (1) of this subsection, the person whose name-based search was the basis for such denial or removal may contest such denial or removal by requesting that state and national criminal history records checks be performed pursuant to subdivision (2) of this subsection. Upon the denial of an emergency placement with a relative

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

or fictive kin caregiver or removal of a child from such relative or fictive kin caregiver's home, the commissioner shall document, in writing, the reason for such denial or removal. If a child is placed in the home of a person who is not a relative or fictive kin caregiver, the commissioner shall confirm, in writing, that such placement, rather than placement with a relative or fictive kin caregiver, serves the best interests of such child.

(4) Any such relative or fictive kin caregiver who accepts placement of a child shall be subject to licensure by the commissioner, pursuant to regulations adopted by the commissioner in accordance with the provisions of chapter 54, to implement the provisions of this section or approval by a child-placing agency licensed pursuant to section 17a-149. The commissioner may grant a waiver from such regulations, including any standard regarding separate bedrooms or room-sharing arrangements, for a child placed with a relative or fictive kin caregiver, on a case-by-case basis, if such placement is otherwise in the best interests of such child, provided no procedure or standard that is safety-related may be so waived. The commissioner shall document, in writing, the reason for granting any waiver from such regulations.

(d) Any individual who has been licensed or approved to adopt or provide foster care and any relative or fictive kin caregiver with whom a child has been placed pursuant to subsection (c) of this section shall apply a reasonable and prudent parent standard, as defined in subsection (a) of section 17a-114d, on behalf of the child.

Sec. 2. Subsection (b) of section 46b-129 of the 2026 supplement to the general statutes is repealed and the following is substituted in lieu thereof (*Effective October 1, 2026*):

(b) If it appears from the specific allegations of the petition and other verified affirmations of fact accompanying the petition and application, or subsequent thereto, that there is reasonable cause to believe that (1)

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

the child or youth is suffering from serious physical illness or serious physical injury or is in immediate physical danger from the child's or youth's surroundings, and (2) as a result of said conditions, the child's or youth's safety is endangered and immediate removal from such surroundings is necessary to ensure the child's or youth's safety, the court shall either (A) issue an order to the parents or other person having responsibility for the care of the child or youth to appear at such time as the court may designate to determine whether the court should vest the child's or youth's temporary care and custody in a person related to the child or youth by blood or marriage, a fictive kin caregiver, as defined in section 17a-114, as amended by this act, or [in] some other person or suitable agency pending disposition of the petition, or (B) issue an order ex parte vesting the child's or youth's temporary care and custody in a person related to the child or youth by blood or marriage, a fictive kin caregiver or [in] some other person or suitable agency. A preliminary hearing on any ex parte custody order or order to appear issued by the court shall be held not later than ten days after the issuance of such order. The service of such orders may be made by any officer authorized by law to serve process, or by any probation officer appointed in accordance with section 46b-123, investigator from the Department of Administrative Services, state or local police officer or indifferent person. Such orders shall include a conspicuous notice to the respondent written in clear and simple language containing at least the following information: (i) That the order contains allegations that conditions in the home have endangered the safety and welfare of the child or youth; (ii) that a hearing will be held on the date on the form; (iii) that the hearing is the opportunity to present the parents' position concerning the alleged facts; (iv) that an attorney will be appointed for parents who cannot afford an attorney; (v) that such parents may apply for a court-appointed attorney by going in person to the court address on the form and are advised to go as soon as possible in order for the attorney to prepare for the hearing; (vi) that such parents, or a person having responsibility for the care and custody of the child or youth, may

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

request the Commissioner of Children and Families to investigate placing the child or youth with a person related to the child or youth by blood or marriage or a fictive kin caregiver who might serve as a licensed foster parent or temporary custodian for such child or youth. The commissioner shall investigate any relative or [relatives] fictive kin caregiver proposed to serve as a licensed foster parent or temporary custodian for such child or youth prior to the preliminary hearing and provide a preliminary report to the court at such hearing as to such relative's or [relatives'] caregiver's suitability and any potential barriers to licensing such relative or [relatives] caregiver as a foster parent or parents or granting temporary custody of such child or youth to such [relative or relatives] caregiver; and (vii) that if such parents have any questions concerning the case or appointment of counsel, any such parent is advised to go to the court or call the clerk's office at the court as soon as possible. Upon application for appointed counsel, the court shall promptly determine eligibility and, if the respondent is eligible, promptly appoint counsel. The expense for any temporary care and custody shall be paid by the town in which such child or youth is at the time residing, and such town shall be reimbursed for such expense by the town found liable for the child's or youth's support, except that where a state agency has filed a petition pursuant to the provisions of subsection (a) of this section, the agency shall pay such expense. The agency shall give primary consideration to placing the child or youth with a relative or fictive kin caregiver. If such placement with a relative or fictive kin caregiver is denied, the agency shall give secondary consideration to placing the child or youth in the town where such child or youth resides. The agency shall file in writing with the clerk of the court the reasons for placing the child or youth in a particular placement with a person other than a relative or fictive kin caregiver or outside the town where the child or youth resides, as applicable. If such child or youth is placed with a person other than a relative or fictive kin caregiver, such writing shall include confirmation that the placement selected for such child or youth, rather than placement with a relative

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

or fictive kin caregiver, serves the best interests of such child or youth. Upon issuance of an ex parte order, the court shall provide to the commissioner and the parent or guardian specific steps necessary for each to take to address the ex parte order for the parent or guardian to retain or regain custody of the child or youth. Upon the issuance of such order, or not later than sixty days after the issuance of such order, the court shall make a determination whether the Department of Children and Families made reasonable efforts to keep the child or youth with his or her parents or guardian prior to the issuance of such order and, if such efforts were not made, whether such reasonable efforts were not possible, taking into consideration the child's or youth's best interests, including the child's or youth's health and safety. Any person or agency in which the temporary care and custody of a child or youth is vested under this section shall have the following rights and duties regarding the child or youth: (I) The obligation of care and control; (II) the authority to make decisions regarding emergency medical, psychological, psychiatric or surgical treatment; and (III) such other rights and duties that the court having jurisdiction may order.

Sec. 3. (NEW) (*Effective July 1, 2026*) (a) As used in this section, "caregiver" means a relative or fictive kin caregiver, as defined in section 17a-114 of the general statutes, as amended by this act, who has accepted emergency placement of a child pursuant to subsection (c) of section 17a-114 of the general statutes, as amended by this act.

(b) There is established a grant program to provide grant payments to caregivers for clothing, food, safety-related purchases and other necessities for children upon the placement of such children with such caregivers by the Commissioner of Children and Families.

(c) Not later than January 1, 2027, the Commissioner of Children and Families shall develop a formula for the distribution of such grant payments, which formula shall include a maximum grant payment of six hundred twenty-five dollars to any caregiver, and guidelines for the

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

appropriate expenditure of grant payments.

(d) Each caregiver who receives a grant payment under this section shall file an expenditure report with the Commissioner of Children and Families at such time and in such manner as the commissioner prescribes. Each such caregiver shall refund to the department any amounts not expended in accordance with the guidelines developed by the commissioner pursuant to subsection (c) of this section.

(e) Not later than January 1, 2028, and annually thereafter, the Commissioner of Children and Families shall submit a report to the Child Welfare Policy and Oversight Committee, established pursuant to section 18 of this act, and, in accordance with the provisions of section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children. Such report shall include, for the preceding year, (1) the number of grant payments provided, (2) the amount of each such grant payment, and (3) the length of each such placement that has concluded.

Sec. 4. (NEW) (*Effective July 1, 2026*) (a) As used in this section, (1) "after school program" means a program that takes place after regular school hours and provides educational, enrichment and recreational activities for children in grades kindergarten to twelve, inclusive, (2) "caregiver" means a relative or fictive kin caregiver, as defined in section 17a-114 of the general statutes, as amended by this act, who has accepted emergency placement of a child pursuant to subsection (c) of section 17a-114 of the general statutes, as amended by this act, or a caregiver as defined in section 17a-126 of the general statutes, and (3) "child care service" has the same meaning as provided in section 19a-131k of the general statutes.

(b) There is established a grant program to provide grant payments to caregivers for all or a portion of costs associated with after school programs and child care services for children placed in the care of such

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

caregivers by the Commissioner of Children and Families.

(c) Not later than January 1, 2027, the Commissioner of Children and Families shall develop (1) an application process, (2) eligibility criteria for caregivers, (3) guidelines for the appropriate expenditure of grant payments by caregivers, and (4) a formula for the distribution of such grant payments, which formula shall include the maximum grant payment available to any caregiver, provided not more than fifty per cent of the total funds available in any fiscal year for such grant program shall be provided for costs associated with after school programs and not more than fifty per cent of such funds shall be provided for costs associated with child care services. Priority for such grant payments shall be given to caregivers who are eligible for foster care maintenance payments or a guardianship subsidy but have not yet received an initial payment or subsidy.

(d) Each caregiver who receives a grant payment under this section shall file an expenditure report with the Commissioner of Children and Families at such time and in such manner as the commissioner prescribes. Each such caregiver shall refund to the department any amounts not expended in accordance with the guidelines developed by the commissioner pursuant to subsection (c) of this section.

(e) Not later than January 1, 2028, and annually thereafter, the Commissioner of Children and Families shall submit a report to the Child Welfare Policy and Oversight Committee, established pursuant to section 18 of this act, and, in accordance with the provisions of section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children. Such report shall include, for the preceding year, the (1) number of applications received by the department for grant payments for costs associated with (A) after school programs, and (B) child care services, and (2) total number of grant payments and the amount of each such grant payment provided for (A) after school programs, and (B) child

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

care services.

Sec. 5. (NEW) (*Effective October 1, 2026*) (a) As used in this section, "relevant field" means social work, applied sociology, child development, child welfare, clinical psychology, counseling, human development and family studies, human services, marriage and family therapy, nursing, social services, education and criminal justice.

(b) Not later than January 1, 2027, the Department of Children and Families, in consultation with institutions of higher education in the state, shall establish a prospective social worker internship program that includes opportunities for internship experiences, job shadowing, support and coaching, and offers participants insight into the professional challenges and rewards associated with social work over the course of not less than one academic semester. The department shall (1) establish (A) an application process and criteria for acceptance in such program, which criteria shall include, but need not be limited to, a requirement that participants are enrolled in a bachelor's or master's degree program in a relevant field, and (B) criteria for the selection of mentors who are employed by the department as social workers, and (2) recruit such employees to participate as mentors in the program.

(c) Not later than January 1, 2027, the Department of Children and Families shall establish a first-year social worker mentorship program for newly hired social workers employed by the department. Such program shall include opportunities for job shadowing, support and coaching during each participant's first year of employment as a social worker by the department. The department shall establish (1) an application process and criteria for acceptance in such program, and (2) criteria for the selection of experienced social workers employed by the department to serve as mentors, and recruit such employees to participate as mentors in the program.

(d) The Department of Children and Families (1) shall pay a stipend

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

to each intern and mentor who successfully completes the internship or mentorship program described in subsections (b) and (c) of this section, and (2) may pay a stipend to each newly hired social worker who successfully completes the mentorship program described in subsection (c) of this section.

(e) Not later than January 1, 2028, and annually thereafter, the Commissioner of Children and Families shall submit a report to the Child Welfare Policy and Oversight Committee, established pursuant to section 18 of this act, and, in accordance with the provisions of section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children. Such report shall include, for the preceding year, the (1) number of participants in the internship and mentorship programs described in subsections (b) and (c) of this section, (2) the cost of each such program, (3) whether or not adequate resources have been allocated to each such program, and (4) recruitment and retention statistics amongst participants.

Sec. 6. (NEW) (*Effective October 1, 2026*) Not later than January 1, 2028, the Commissioner of Children and Families, in consultation with the Commissioner of Mental Health and Addiction Services, shall develop and provide a mandatory educational training program for employees of the Department of Children and Families concerning (1) perinatal mood and anxiety disorders, and (2) trauma-informed, nonstigmatizing practices for interacting with individuals suffering from such disorders. Such training program shall (A) include guidance to such employees concerning such disorders and practices, and (B) be offered not less than once every six months thereafter. Each person employed by the department shall complete such training program at least once. Employees hired prior to January 1, 2028, shall complete such training program not later than December 31, 2028. Employees hired on or after January 1, 2028, shall complete such training not later than one year after

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

beginning such employment.

Sec. 7. (NEW) (*Effective October 1, 2026*) Not later than January 1, 2028, the Commissioner of Children and Families shall, in consultation with the Commissioner of Emergency Services and Public Protection and the executive director of the Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity and Opportunity, established pursuant to section 2-127 of the general statutes, develop and provide a mandatory educational training program for employees of the Department of Children and Families concerning human trafficking and trauma-informed, nonstigmatizing practices for interacting with child and adult victims of human trafficking. Such training program shall (1) include guidance to such employees concerning such practices, and (2) be offered not less than once every six months thereafter. Each person employed by the department shall complete such training program at least once. Employees hired prior to January 1, 2028, shall complete such training program not later than December 31, 2028. Employees hired on or after January 1, 2028, shall complete such training not later than one year after beginning such employment.

Sec. 8. (NEW) (*Effective October 1, 2026*) Not later than January 1, 2028, the Commissioner of Children and Families shall develop and provide a mandatory educational training program for employees of the Department of Children and Families concerning cultural sensitivity in the delivery of the department's services and implicit bias, as defined in section 19a-490u of the general statutes. Such training shall (1) include guidance to such employees concerning such issues, and (2) be offered not less than once every six months thereafter. Each person employed by the department shall complete such training program not less than once every two years. Employees hired prior to January 1, 2028, shall initially complete such training program not later than December 31, 2028. Employees hired on or after January 1, 2028, shall initially complete such training not later than one year after beginning such

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

employment.

Sec. 9. (NEW) (*Effective July 1, 2026*) (a) As used in this section, "postsecondary education" means any program that leads to an academic degree or certification in a vocation or trade.

(b) Not later than January 1, 2027, the Department of Children and Families shall establish a postsecondary education grant program for the purpose of providing grant payments to fund the postsecondary education of youths (1) adopted through the department's foster care program on or after January 1, 2005, and prior to turning eighteen years of age, and (2) committed to the department who consent to remain in the care of the Commissioner of Children and Families upon reaching eighteen years of age pursuant to section 46b-129 of the general statutes, as amended by this act. The department shall establish (A) an application process, (B) a list of postsecondary education programs approved by the department, (C) a formula for the distribution of such grant payments, and (D) eligibility criteria for such youths. No such youth shall participate in the program after such youth reaches twenty-one years of age, except that the commissioner may permit any youth that enrolled in the program prior to turning twenty-one years of age to continue to participate until such youth turns twenty-four years of age or completes such youth's postsecondary education program, whichever occurs earlier. The department shall require any youth participating in the program to complete for each year such youth is enrolled in postsecondary education, as a condition to such participation, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid and applications for any appropriate scholarships and grants, including, but not limited to, through any scholarship application portal administered by the provider of such postsecondary education.

(c) Not later than July 1, 2027, the Commissioner of Children and Families shall submit a report, in accordance with the provisions of section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the joint standing committee of

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children. Such report shall include a description of the status of the postsecondary education grant program established pursuant to this section, including, but not limited to, (1) the number of applications to such program received by the Department of Children and Families to date, (2) the number of applicants accepted to participate in the program to date, and (3) any challenges the department encountered in implementing the program.

(d) Not later than January 1, 2028, the Commissioner of Children and Families shall submit a report, in accordance with the provisions of section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the joint standing committees of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children, higher education, appropriations and government oversight, and the Auditors of Public Accounts. Such report shall include, but need not be limited to, information concerning (1) the number of applicants to such program and any similar program offered by the Department of Children and Families, in each year any such program was offered, (2) the number of applicants that received a grant payment under such program or any such similar program, in each year any such program was offered, (3) the total amount of grant payments provided pursuant to such program and any such similar program, in each year any such program was offered, and the amount of each individual grant in each such year, (4) the average amount of each grant payment provided pursuant to such program and any such similar program, per student annually and per student over the duration of such students' participation in any such program, (5) the specific postsecondary education programs attended by participants in such program during the prior year, including the names of the institutions offering such programs and the degrees toward which participants are working, (6) the percentage of participants who have completed a postsecondary education program while participating in such program and any such similar program, (7) the number of participants who have requested to

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

remain in such program or any such similar program after reaching twenty-one years of age, and the number of participants who have been approved by the department to do so, (8) the reasons the department has provided applicants to such program, and any such similar program, for denying such applicants from participating in such programs, (9) the reasons the department has provided participants in such program, and any such similar program, for denying such participants' requests to remain in such programs after reaching twenty-one years of age, (10) the length of time any such similar program has existed pursuant to department policy, and (11) demographic data pertaining to participants in such program and any such similar program.

Sec. 10. (*Effective October 1, 2026*) Not later than July 1, 2028, the Auditors of Public Accounts shall conduct a performance audit of the postsecondary education grant program established pursuant to section 9 of this act. Said auditors shall conduct such performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards or by another method said auditors deem appropriate. Said auditors shall submit a report, in accordance with section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the joint standing committees of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children, higher education, appropriations and government oversight. Such report shall include, but need not be limited to, (1) such audit; (2) information concerning (A) the number of applicants to such program and any similar program offered by the Department of Children and Families, in each year any such program was offered, (B) the number of applicants that received a grant payment under such program or any such similar program, in each year any such program was offered, (C) the total amount of grant payments provided pursuant to such program and any such similar program, in each year any such program was offered, and the amount of each individual grant in each such year, (D) the average amount of each grant payment provided pursuant to such program and any such

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

similar program, per student annually and per student over the duration of such students' participation in any such program, (E) the specific postsecondary education programs attended by participants in such program during the prior year, including the names of the institutions offering such programs and the degrees toward which participants are working, (F) the percentage of participants who have completed a postsecondary education program while participating in such program and any such similar program, (G) the number of participants who have requested to remain in such program or any such similar program after reaching twenty-one years of age, and the number of participants who have been approved by the department to do so, (H) the reasons the department has provided applicants to such program, and any such similar program, for denying such applicants from participating in such programs, (I) the reasons the department has provided participants in such program, and any such similar program, for denying such participants' requests to remain in such programs after reaching twenty-one years of age, (J) the length of time any such similar program has existed pursuant to department policy, and (K) demographic data pertaining to participants in such program and any such similar program; and (3) any recommendations for improving the administrative efficiency or effectiveness of such program.

Sec. 11. (NEW) (*Effective July 1, 2026*) Not later than January 1, 2027, the Department of Children and Families shall establish an Internet web site, which may be within the department's Internet web site, that includes the following:

(1) A public, online dashboard to provide real-time information concerning the department's administration of and performance with respect to the state-wide program of services described in section 17a-3 of the general statutes. Such information shall include, but need not be limited to, the information identified by the working group established pursuant to section 12 of this act and each annual report submitted

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

pursuant to sections 3, 4 and 5 of this act. Such dashboard shall (A) be integrated with any electronic data collection and tracking tools utilized by the department to ensure that such information is consistently and continually updated, and (B) present such information in a manner that permits users to access and understand such information without specialized knowledge or training.

(2) Information for the public concerning offices, programs and services administered and offered by the department, including, but not limited to, the Office of Community Relations, housing and homelessness programs, the Careline established pursuant to section 17a-103a of the general statutes and text message programs.

(3) Information concerning the identification of child abuse and neglect and how to report child abuse and neglect to the department.

(4) The educational training program developed pursuant to section 17a-101 of the general statutes, in a video format that members of the public may access without creating a username or password for use on such Internet web site, and any accompanying training materials.

Sec. 12. (*Effective from passage*) (a) There is established a working group to identify information to be included on the online dashboard established pursuant to section 11 of this act concerning the Department of Children and Families' administration of and performance with respect to the state-wide program of services described in section 17a-3 of the general statutes.

(b) The working group shall consist of the following members: (1) Members of the General Assembly, as designated by the chairpersons of the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children; (2) the ranking members of the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children, or their designees; (3) the

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

Commissioner of Children and Families, or the commissioner's designee; and (4) any individuals such chairpersons deem relevant and necessary to carry out the duties of the working group.

(c) The administrative staff of the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children shall serve as administrative staff of the working group.

(d) Not later than October 1, 2026, the working group shall submit a report on its findings, in accordance with the provisions of section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children. The working group shall terminate on the date that it submits such report or October 1, 2026, whichever is later.

Sec. 13. (NEW) (*Effective October 1, 2026*) (a) The parent or guardian of a child who (1) is the subject of an investigation conducted pursuant to section 17a-101g of the general statutes, as amended by this act, (2) is under protective supervision, as defined in section 17a-93 of the general statutes, (3) is receiving protective services, as defined in section 17a-93 of the general statutes, or (4) resides with a child described in subdivisions (1) to (3), inclusive, of this subsection, shall notify the Commissioner of Children and Families, in a form and manner prescribed by the commissioner, if such child will be removed from the state for a period exceeding fourteen consecutive days. Such notification shall be provided not less than forty-eight hours prior to any such removal, and include the (A) address of each location at which such child will sleep during such removal, and (B) duration of such removal. If the duration of any such removal is extended, such parent or guardian shall notify the commissioner, in a form and manner prescribed by the commissioner, as soon as is practicable.

(b) Upon the (1) removal from the state by the parent or guardian of a child described in subsection (a) of this section for a period exceeding

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

fourteen consecutive days, where notification has not been provided pursuant to subsection (a) of this section, or (2) extension of the duration of any removal by a parent or guardian where notification has not been provided pursuant to subsection (a) of this section, the Commissioner of Children and Families shall (A) attempt to contact a parent, guardian or other family member of such child on three consecutive days following such removal or extension, to ascertain such child's location, if unknown, and evaluate such child's safety, except that the commissioner may discontinue efforts to contact such parent, guardian or other family member if contact is made during such three-day period, and (B) if such child's location is known, (i) contact the child welfare or law enforcement agency for the jurisdiction in which such child is located and request that such agency conduct an in-person visit to such child's location for the purpose of evaluating such child's safety, (ii) follow up with such child welfare or law enforcement agency on three consecutive days following such request to determine whether such visit was conducted and discuss any findings, except that the commissioner may discontinue efforts to follow up with such agency if the commissioner determines such visit was conducted during such three-day period, and (iii) conduct an in-person visit to evaluate such child's safety or, if such in-person visit is not feasible, attempt to conduct a visit by means of a video conferencing platform for the purpose of evaluating such child's safety. The commissioner shall document in writing all attempts to contact and communicate with any child, parent, guardian, family member, child welfare agency or law enforcement agency pursuant to this subsection.

(c) The provisions of subsection (b) of this section shall not apply where the Commissioner of Children and Families is not notified of the removal of a child described in subsection (a) of this section until after such child's return to the state.

(d) The Commissioner of Children and Families shall provide written

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

notice of the provisions of this section to the parents or guardians of each child described in subsection (a) of this section.

(e) The Commissioner of Children and Families may (1) undertake the actions described in subsection (b) of this section with respect to any child described in subsection (a) of this section who has been removed from the state for a period of fourteen or fewer consecutive days, or (2) require the parent or guardian of any such child to notify the commissioner if such child will be removed from the state for a period of fourteen or fewer consecutive days.

Sec. 14. (NEW) (*Effective from passage*) Evidence that the parent or guardian of a child has voluntarily sought treatment from or is being voluntarily treated by a mental health professional for mental health concerns, including, but not limited to, a perinatal mood or anxiety disorder, shall not form the sole basis for any action or proceeding by the Department of Children and Families, provided nothing in this section shall preclude any action or proceeding by such department based on harm or risk of harm to a child or the use of information concerning such treatment in any action or proceeding where authorized.

Sec. 15. Subsection (b) of section 17a-101g of the general statutes is repealed and the following is substituted in lieu thereof (*Effective October 1, 2026*):

(b) The Commissioner of Children and Families shall establish protocols for the investigation of and response to reports of child abuse or neglect of children from birth to three years of age. Such protocols shall include, but need not be limited to, (1) appropriate supervision of the case, (2) appropriate visitation by department personnel to such children, (3) documentation of case activities relevant to the safety and well-being of such children, and (4) a case supervision tool specific to the unique needs and risk status of children from birth to three years of

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

age. All investigations of a report of child abuse or neglect pursuant to this section shall include a home visit at which the child and any siblings are observed, if appropriate, a determination of the nature, extent and cause or causes of the reported abuse or neglect, a determination of the person or persons suspected to be responsible for such abuse or neglect, the name, age and condition of other children residing in the same household and an evaluation of the parents and the home. During any such observation, department personnel shall consider any opinions expressed by the child or other children residing in the household concerning whether such child was abused or neglected. The report of such investigation shall be in writing. The investigation shall also include, but not be limited to, a review of criminal conviction information concerning the person or persons alleged to be responsible for such abuse or neglect and previous allegations of abuse or neglect relating to the child or other children residing in the household or relating to family violence. After an investigation into a report of abuse or neglect has been completed, the commissioner shall determine, based upon a standard of reasonable cause, whether a child has been abused or neglected, as defined in section 46b-120. If the commissioner determines that abuse or neglect has occurred, the commissioner shall also determine whether: (A) There is an identifiable person responsible for such abuse or neglect; and (B) such identifiable person poses a risk to the health, safety or well-being of children and should be recommended by the commissioner for placement on the child abuse and neglect registry established pursuant to section 17a-101k. If the commissioner has made the determinations in subparagraphs (A) and (B) of this subsection, the commissioner shall issue notice of a recommended finding to the person suspected to be responsible for such abuse or neglect in accordance with section 17a-101k. If the child is represented by an attorney or guardian ad litem, the commissioner shall notify the child's attorney or guardian ad litem in writing not less than five days prior to the date of any meeting in which the department is considering removing the child from the household, except, if the

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

commissioner, or the commissioner's designee, has authorized the immediate removal of a child from his or her household pursuant to the provisions of subsection (e) of this section, the commissioner, or the commissioner's designee, shall not be required to provide advance written notice of such removal to the child's attorney or guardian ad litem.

Sec. 16. (NEW) (*Effective October 1, 2026*) (a) As used in this section, "personal emergency communication device" means a global positioning system-enabled, wearable device that allows an individual to contact local police by pressing a button or through another mechanism.

(b) On and after January 1, 2027, the Commissioner of Children and Families shall (1) provide personal emergency communication devices to employees of the Department of Children and Families who regularly conduct visits to or evaluations of the homes of children under the supervision of the commissioner and desire access to such devices during such visits or evaluations, and (2) develop guidelines and a training program for the use of such devices.

Sec. 17. (*Effective July 1, 2026*) For the fiscal year ending June 30, 2027, the Department of Children and Families shall establish an urgent crisis center, as defined in section 38a-477aa of the general statutes, in the city of Stamford.

Sec. 18. (NEW) (*Effective October 1, 2026*) (a) There is established a Child Welfare Policy and Oversight Committee. The committee shall evaluate and make recommendations concerning (1) the operation, policies and service outcomes of state agencies providing services relating to and supporting child welfare in the state, and (2) the efficacy and continued operation of existing state-wide boards, committees and councils charged with oversight and evaluation of child welfare services.

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

(b) The committee shall consist of the following members:

(1) Two members appointed by the speaker of the House of Representatives, one of whom shall be a mental health professional employed at an urgent crisis center, as defined in section 19a-179f of the general statutes;

(2) Two members appointed by the president pro tempore of the Senate, one of whom shall be a regional social worker supervisor employed by the Department of Children and Families;

(3) Two members appointed by the majority leader of the House of Representatives, one of whom shall be a private provider of child welfare services;

(4) Two members appointed by the majority leader of the Senate, one of whom shall be a foster parent licensed pursuant to section 17a-114 of the general statutes, as amended by this act;

(5) Two members appointed by the minority leader of the House of Representatives, one of whom shall be an expert in child welfare employed by an institution of higher education in the state;

(6) Two members appointed by the minority leader of the Senate, one of whom shall be a relative or fictive kin caregiver, as defined in section 17a-114 of the general statutes, as amended by this act, with whom a child in the care and custody of the Commissioner of Children and Families has been placed;

(7) The chairpersons and ranking members of the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children;

(8) The chairpersons and ranking members of the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

relating to appropriations;

(9) The Commissioner of Children and Families, or the commissioner's designee;

(10) The Commissioner of Education, or the commissioner's designee;

(11) The Commissioner of Mental Health and Addiction Services, or the commissioner's designee;

(12) The Commissioner of Developmental Services, or the commissioner's designee;

(13) The Commissioner of Social Services, or the commissioner's designee;

(14) The Commissioner of Housing, or the commissioner's designee;

(15) The Commissioner of Correction, or the commissioner's designee;

(16) The Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management, or the secretary's designee;

(17) The Chief Court Administrator, or the Chief Court Administrator's designee;

(18) The Probate Court Administrator, or the Probate Court Administrator's designee;

(19) The Chief Public Defender, or the Chief Public Defender's designee; and

(20) The Child Advocate, or the Child Advocate's designee.

(c) Any vacancy shall be filled by the appointing authority. Members of the committee shall serve without compensation.

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

(d) The chairpersons of the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children, or the chairperson's designees, and the Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management, or the secretary's designee, shall serve as cochairpersons of the committee. Such cochairpersons shall schedule the first meeting of the committee, which shall be held not later than sixty days after the effective date of this section. The committee shall meet quarterly, and more often upon the call of the cochairpersons. The cochairpersons may designate subcommittees to carry out the functions of the committee.

(e) The committee shall complete its duties under this section in consultation with one or more organizations that focus on relevant issues regarding child welfare, including an independent institution of higher education in the state. The committee may accept administrative support and technical and research assistance from any such organization.

(f) Not later than January 1, 2028, and annually thereafter until such time as the committee is terminated pursuant to subsection (g) of this section, the committee shall submit a report, in accordance with the provisions of section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children, concerning its evaluation and recommendations.

(g) On or after January 1, 2031, the committee may, upon making a determination that its work is no longer necessary or beneficial to the provision of services relating to and supporting child welfare in the state, by majority vote of the committee, terminate.

Sec. 19. (*Effective from passage*) The Departments of Children and Families and Emergency Services and Public Protection shall conduct a joint study to identify ways to improve (1) communication between said departments with respect to the provision of child welfare services, and (2) existing policies and practices relating to the removal of children

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

from such children's homes pursuant to sections 17a-101g, of the general statutes, as amended by this act, and 46b-129 of the general statutes, as amended by this act. Not later than January 1, 2027, the Departments of Children and Families Emergency Services and Public Protection shall jointly submit a report, in accordance with the provisions of section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children. Such report shall include the departments' findings and recommendations for improvements.

Sec. 20. (*Effective from passage*) The Department of Children and Families and the Office of the Child Advocate shall conduct a joint study to identify ways to improve department policies and practices to ensure the immediate removal from an out-of-home placement made by the Commissioner of Children and Families of any child who becomes a victim of physical or sexual assault occurring in or as a result of such out-of-home placement. Not later than January 1, 2027, the Department of Children and Families and the Office of the Child Advocate shall jointly submit a report, in accordance with the provisions of section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children. Such report shall include the department's and office's findings and recommendations for improvements.

Sec. 21. Section 46b-486 of the general statutes is repealed and the following is substituted in lieu thereof (*Effective October 1, 2026*):

The Department of Public Health may release information relating to an acknowledgment of parentage to (1) a signatory of the acknowledgment, (2) the child if such child is eighteen years of age or older, (3) a guardian of the person whose parentage is acknowledged, (4) an attorney representing a person to whom such information may be released, (5) a court, (6) a federal agency, (7) an authorized representative of the Department of Social Services, (8) an authorized

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

representative of the Department of Children and Families, (9) the child support agency of this state, (10) any agency acting under a cooperative or purchase of service agreement with the child support agency of this state, and (11) the child support agency of another state.

Sec. 22. (NEW) (*Effective October 1, 2026*) Notwithstanding the provisions of subsection (a) of section 17a-101g of the general statutes, following the third accepted report of child abuse or neglect pursuant to sections 17a-101a to 17a-101c, inclusive, of the general statutes, or section 17a-103 of the general statutes, in which (1) the child who is the subject of the report, (2) a sibling, half-sibling, step-sibling or other child residing in the same home as such child, or (3) any combination of children described in subdivisions (1) and (2) of this section, has been identified as the subject of prior accepted reports during the previous twelve-month period, the commissioner shall commence an investigation as described in section 17a-101g of the general statutes, as amended by this act. Such investigation shall not be conducted by any employee of the Department of Children and Families who conducted an investigation into an allegation of child abuse or neglect concerning any child described in subdivisions (1) and (2) of this section during the previous twelve-month period. Nothing in this section shall (A) preclude the commissioner from authorizing the removal of any child from such child's surroundings pursuant to subsection (e) of section 17a-101g of the general statutes, or (B) be construed to require the department to assign a different employee to investigate any report of child abuse or neglect concerning any such child made subsequent to the completion of any investigation required pursuant to this section.

Sec. 23. (NEW) (*Effective October 1, 2026*) (a) On and after October 1, 2026, not later than one week following the release from a correctional institution of a person sentenced to a period of parole or probation following such person's conviction for a violation of section 53-20, 53-21, 53-23, 53a-70c, subdivision (2) of subsection (a) of section 53a-86,

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

section 53a-90a, sections 53a-196 to 53a-196f, inclusive, or section 53a-196i of the general statutes, the Commissioner of Correction, or the commissioner's designee, or the executive director of the Court Support Services Division of the Judicial Branch, or the executive director's designee, as applicable, shall notify the Commissioner of Children and Families, or the commissioner's designee, if an individual under the age of eighteen resides at the residential address to which such person was released.

(b) (1) Upon receipt of a notification pursuant to subsection (a) of this section, the Commissioner of Children and Families, or the commissioner's designee, shall determine whether any individual under the age of eighteen residing at such residential address is under protective supervision, as defined in section 17a-93 of the general statutes, or receiving protective services, as defined in section 17a-93 of the general statutes. Not later than one week following a determination that any such individual is under such supervision or receiving such services, the commissioner, or the commissioner's designee, shall conduct a visit to such address for the purpose of evaluating the safety of any such individual. The commissioner, or the commissioner's designee, shall conduct a visit to such home not less than monthly thereafter, until such period of probation or parole ends or an individual under the age of eighteen no longer resides at such address.

(2) The Commissioner of Children and Families, or the commissioner's designee, shall notify the Commissioner of Correction, or the commissioner's designee, or the executive director of the Court Support Services Division of the Judicial Branch, or the executive director's designee, as applicable, if no individual under the age of eighteen residing at such residential address is under such supervision or receiving such services. Upon receipt of such notification, and not less than every three months thereafter until such period of probation or parole ends or an individual under the age of eighteen no longer resides

Substitute House Bill No. 5004

at such address, the Commissioner of Correction, or the commissioner's designee, or the executive director of the Court Support Services Division of the Judicial Branch, or the executive director's designee, as applicable, shall inquire with such probationer or parolee concerning the welfare of any individual under the age of eighteen residing with such probationer or parolee.