
OLR Bill Analysis

sHB 5004

AN ACT CONCERNING CHILD WELFARE ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY.

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Requires the monthly guardianship subsidy for the needs of the child to be equal to, rather than not exceed, the foster care maintenance payment that would have otherwise been paid on behalf of the child

BACKGROUND

SUMMARY

This bill makes numerous changes to child welfare law. A section-by-section analysis follows.

EFFECTIVE DATE: Various, see below.

§ 1 — RELATIVE AND FICTIVE KIN IN EMERGENCY PLACEMENTS

Requires, rather than permits, the DCF commissioner to make an emergency placement of a child to an unlicensed relative or fictive kin caregiver if certain conditions are met; requires the commissioner to document in writing the reasons for denying an emergency placement with a relative or fictive kin caregiver

The bill requires, rather than permits, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) commissioner to make an emergency placement of a child to a relative or fictive kin caregiver (an unrelated person at least 21 years old who has a significant emotional connection with the child or family) who is not DCF-licensed or -approved when the placement is deemed in the child's best interest. As under current law, DCF must first do a basic family assessment, including a home visit. By law, an "emergency placement" is the placement of a child in the home of a relative or fictive kin caregiver due to the sudden unavailability of the child's primary caretaker.

As part of this process, the commissioner must order a criminal history and child abuse registry check of anyone 18 years old or older living in the home after the placement is approved. By law, the criminal

history can result in the denial of the placement and removal of the child. The bill requires the commissioner to document in writing the reason for the denial if the placement was with a relative or fictive kin caregiver or removal of a child from the relative or fictive kin caregiver's home.

The bill also requires that if a child is placed in the home of a person who is not a relative or fictive kin caregiver, the commissioner must confirm, in writing, that the placement, rather than placement with a relative or fictive kin caregiver, serves the child's best interests.

EFFECTIVE DATE: October 1, 2026

§ 2 — RELATIVE AND FICTIVE KIN AND ABUSE AND NEGLECT PROCEEDINGS

Explicitly includes a fictive caregiver in the placement options for an abuse and neglect proceeding; requires the state agency to give primary consideration to placement with a relative or fictive kin caregiver

The bill explicitly includes a fictive kin caregiver in the list of possible temporary care and custody placement options a court can consider during a child abuse and neglect proceeding. Under current law a court can consider vesting the child's care and custody temporarily with a relative, agency, or other person. It makes the same change under the existing option for the court to order ex parte (on behalf of one party) vesting the child's care and custody temporarily with a relative, agency, or other person. These proceedings are held following a petition to the court alleging child abuse or neglect.

Current law requires the state agency with authority for the child to give primary consideration to placing the child in the town where the child lives. Under the bill the agency must give primary consideration to placement with a relative or fictive kin caregiver. If that placement is denied, the agency must give secondary consideration to placing the child in the town where the child lives.

By law, the agency must file in writing with the court clerk the reasons for a child's particular placement. The bill adds the requirement for the filing to include confirmation that the placement selected for the

child, if the placement is not with a relative or fictive kin caregiver, serves the best interests of the child.

The bill makes related minor and conforming changes.

EFFECTIVE DATE: October 1, 2026

§ 3 — STIPENDS FOR DCF EMPLOYEES PROVIDING TRAINING

Creates a stipend program for DCF employees providing training to families

By January 1, 2027, the bill requires the DCF commissioner to establish and administer a program to pay stipends to DCF employees who lead certain DCF courses offered to individuals or the parents or guardians of individuals (1) receiving protective services or (2) who are under protective supervision. The commissioner must prioritize the courses where demand exceeds availability and those she finds are the most beneficial to families and children. The commissioner must also make a course list and decide the stipend amount for each employee.

By law, protective services are public welfare services provided to the family following a complaint of abuse, neglect, or abandonment with no ruling on the complaint. This means either there has been no court decision on the complaint or court jurisdiction has not been determined. An order for protective supervision means a court determined that a child was neglected, but DCF or another social agency, at the court's request, is helping to correct the neglect while the child remains in the home (CGS § 17a-93).

EFFECTIVE DATE: October 1, 2026

§ 4 — CAREGIVER GRANT FOR NECESSITIES

Establishes a grant program to make payments to certain caregivers for clothing, food, safety-related purchases, and other necessities for children in their care

The bill establishes a grant program to make payments to caregivers for clothing, food, safety-related purchases, and other necessities for the children in their care. For purposes of the grant a "caregiver" is a (1) caregiver in the subsidized guardianship program, (2) person who has accepted emergency placement of a child by DCF, or (3) parent anticipating near-term reunification with the parent's child.

It requires the DCF commissioner, by January 1, 2027, to develop (1) an application process; (2) eligibility criteria for caregivers; (3) guidelines for the appropriate spending of grant payments by caregivers; and (4) a distribution formula for the grant payments, which must include the maximum grant payment available to any caregiver. The commissioner must prioritize grant payments for caregivers who are eligible for foster care maintenance payments or a guardianship subsidy but have not yet received an initial payment or subsidy.

The bill requires each caregiver receiving a grant payment to file an expenditure report with the DCF commissioner in as she determines. A caregiver must refund any amounts not spent in line with the commissioner's guidelines.

By January 1, 2028, and each following year, the DCF commissioner must submit a report to the Child Welfare Policy and Oversight Committee (see § 20) and the Committee on Children. The report must include, for the preceding year, the number of applications received, the number of grant payments provided, and the amount of each grant payment.

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2026

§ 5 — AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAM GRANTS FOR FOSTER CAREGIVERS

Establishes a grant program giving financial support to caregivers to help cover the cost of after school programs for foster children in their care

The bill establishes a grant program to give financial support to caregivers (those who are licensed or approved by DCF to provide foster care) to cover, either in full or partially, the costs of after school programs for children placed in their care. Under the bill, after school programs take place after regular school hours and provide educational, enrichment, and recreational activities for children grades kindergarten through 12.

Grant payments must be prioritized for caregivers who are eligible for foster care maintenance payments or a guardianship subsidy but have not yet received an initial payment or subsidy.

For the grant program, the bill requires DCF to develop the following by January 1, 2027:

1. an application process;
2. caregiver eligibility criteria;
3. appropriate expenditure guidelines for the caregiver grants; and
4. a grant distribution formula, including the maximum grant available.

Each caregiver who receives a grant must (1) file an expenditure report with DCF and (2) return unexpended funds to DCF.

The bill also requires DCF to annually report on various aspects of the grant program, including the number of applicants and grants provided, to the Child Welfare Policy and Oversight Committee (see § 20) and the Committee on Children beginning January 1, 2028.

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2026

§ 6 — ESTABLISHMENT OF PROSPECTIVE SOCIAL WORKER INTERNSHIP AND FIRST YEAR SOCIAL WORKER MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS

Requires DCF to establish a (1) first-year social worker mentorship program for their newly hired social workers and (2) prospective social worker internship program for people enrolled in a bachelor's or master's degree program in a relevant field

The bill requires DCF to establish a (1) first-year social worker mentorship program and (2) prospective social worker internship program (in consultation with higher education institutions). Under the bill, DCF must (1) establish both the internship and mentorship program by January 1, 2027, and (2) pay a stipend to each intern, mentee, and mentor who successfully completes either program.

For both programs, DCF must:

1. establish an application process and acceptance criteria,
2. set mentor-selection criteria, and

3. recruit social workers to be mentors.

Prospective Social Worker Internship Program

The bill requires DCF, in consultation with institutions of higher education in Connecticut, to establish a prospective social worker internship program for people enrolled in a bachelor's or master's degree program in a relevant field, including, among others, social work, applied sociology, child development, clinical psychology, nursing, social services, education, or criminal justice.

The program, administered through at least one academic semester, must (1) include opportunities for internship experiences, job shadowing, support, and coaching, and (2) offer participants insight into the challenges and benefits of social work.

First-Year Social Worker Mentorship Program

The bill requires DCF to establish a first-year social worker mentorship program for their newly hired social workers. The program, administered during participants' first year as a social worker, must include opportunities for job shadowing, support, and coaching.

EFFECTIVE DATE: October 1, 2026

§§ 7-9 — TRAINING ON PERINATAL MOOD AND ANXIETY, HUMAN TRAFFICKING, AND CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Requires training for DCF staff on perinatal mood and anxiety disorders, human trafficking, and cultural sensitivity and implicit bias

The bill requires the DCF commissioner to develop and provide a mandatory educational training program for DCF employees in three areas: (1) perinatal mood and anxiety disorders, (2) human trafficking, and (3) cultural sensitivity in the delivery of the department's services and implicit bias.

For all three types of training, DCF employees hired before January 1, 2028, must initially complete each training by December 31, 2028. Employees hired on or after January 1, 2028, must initially complete each training not later than one year after beginning employment. The perinatal mood and anxiety disorders and human trafficking trainings

must be completed at least once, and the cultural sensitivity and implicit bias training at least once every two years.

All three trainings must be ready by January 1, 2028, and be offered at least every six months and each training must include the respective guidance to the employees.

Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorders (§ 7)

The DCF commissioner must develop and provide a mandatory educational training program for DCF employees about (1) perinatal mood and anxiety disorders and (2) trauma-informed, non-stigmatizing practices for interacting with people suffering from these disorders. The commissioner must do this in consultation with the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services commissioner.

Human Trafficking (§ 8)

The DCF commissioner must develop and provide a mandatory educational training program for DCF employees about human trafficking and trauma-informed, non-stigmatizing practices for interacting with child and adult victims of human trafficking. The commissioner must do this in consultation with the executive director of the Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity and Opportunity.

Cultural Sensitivity and Implicit Bias (§ 9)

The DCF commissioner must develop and provide a mandatory educational training program for DCF employees about implicit bias and delivering the agency's services with cultural sensitivity. Under the bill "implicit bias" means an attitude or internalized stereotype that affects a person's perceptions, actions, and decisions in an unconscious way and often contributes to unequal treatment of a person based on their race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, disability, or other characteristic.

EFFECTIVE DATE: October 1, 2026

§§ 10 & 11 — POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION GRANT PROGRAM FOR YOUTHS IN DCF CARE

Requires DCF to establish a postsecondary education grant program for young people who consent to stay in DCF care after turning 18 years old; requires the state auditors to audit the program

The bill requires DCF to establish a postsecondary education grant program by January 1, 2027. The program must give grants to fund postsecondary education, meaning programs that lead to an academic degree, vocation certification, or employment training, for youths who consent to remain in DCF care after turning 18 years old. Under the bill, youths cannot start participating in the program after they turn 26 years old, however youths may continue to participate until they (1) turn 28 years old or (2) complete their postsecondary education program, whichever happens first.

DCF must establish:

1. an application process,
2. a list of DCF-approved postsecondary education programs,
3. a grant distribution formula, and
4. eligibility criteria.

Each year, participants must complete (1) the Free Application for Federal Student Aid and (2) applications for any appropriate scholarships and grants, including any available through a scholarship application portal administered by an education provider.

DCF must annually report on various aspects of the grant program, including the number of applicants and grants provided, to the Child Welfare Policy and Oversight Committee (see § 20) and the Committee on Children beginning January 1, 2028.

The bill also requires the Auditors of Public Accounts to (1) conduct a performance audit of the program by January 1, 2028, and (2) submit a report on the audit and any program recommendations to the Committee on Children.

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2026, except the provision requiring the program to be audited is effective October 1, 2026.

§§ 12 & 13 — DCF ONLINE DASHBOARD AND ASSOCIATED WORKING GROUP

(1) Requires DCF to make a public website, separate from their existing website, with an online dashboard and various information related to DCF programs and procedures and child welfare by January 1, 2027, and (2) creates a working group to identify information for the online dashboard

The bill requires DCF to make a separate website from the department’s existing website by January 1, 2027. The new website must include a public, online dashboard providing information on DCF’s state-wide program relating to services for abused, neglected, and uncared for children and youths, as well as children and youths who have mental health needs and substance use disorders. The dashboard also must (1) include information identified by the working group (see *Online Dashboard Working Group* below), (2) be integrated with any electronic data collection and tracking tools DCF uses, and (3) present information in an accessible way.

The website must also include information on:

1. DCF offices, programs, and services, including the Office of Community Relations, housing and homelessness programs, the child abuse and neglect Careline, and text message programs for the public; and
2. child abuse and neglect identification and how to report child abuse and neglect.

The website must also include the mandated reporter video training program in a publicly-accessible format that does not require a username or password.

Online Dashboard Working Group

The bill creates a working group to identify information to be included on the online dashboard. The working group must consist of:

1. members from the General Assembly, as designated by the

Committee on Children chairpersons;

2. any people the chairpersons find relevant and necessary to carry out the duties of the working group; and
3. the DCF commissioner or her designee.

The Committee on Children’s administrative staff serve as the working group’s administrative staff.

The working group must submit a report with its findings to the Committee on Children by October 1, 2026, and ends on that date or when it submits its report, whichever is later.

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2026, except the provision creating the working group is effective upon passage.

§ 14 — DCF PROCEDURES WHEN A CHILD UNDER PROTECTIVE SUPERVISION OR SERVICES IS TAKEN OUT OF STATE BY A PARENT OR GUARDIAN

Requires DCF to carry out various procedures when a child under protective supervision or services is taken out of the state by a parent or guardian, if DCF knows the child's location

The bill requires DCF to carry out various procedures when (1) a child who is under protective supervision or receiving protective services is taken out of the state for more than 14 days by a parent or guardian and (2) they know the child’s current location.

In this situation, DCF must (1) contact the child welfare agency in the jurisdiction where the child is located (the “local agency”) and (2) visit with the child in-person (or virtually if in-person is not feasible) to evaluate the child’s safety.

Contacting Relevant Local Agency

When contacting the local agency, DCF must:

1. give the local agency the child’s location and status;
2. request that the local agency visit in-person at the child’s location to evaluate his or her safety; and

3. contact the local agency to discuss their findings (if the local agency agreed to visit).

Follow-Up Requirements After DCF Visit

Following DCF's visit, if there is reasonable cause to suspect or believe the child has (1) been abused or neglected; (2) had a nonaccidental physical injury or an injury inconsistent with the history given of it; or (3) is at imminent risk of serious harm, DCF must notify the local agency.

EFFECTIVE DATE: October 1, 2026

§ 15 — PROHIBITION OF USING MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT AS SOLE OR PRIMARY REASON FOR DCF ACTION

Generally prohibits DCF from using evidence that a parent or guardian has voluntarily sought or received mental health treatment as the sole or primary reason to pursue any action or proceeding

The bill generally prohibits DCF from using evidence that a parent or guardian has voluntarily sought or received professional mental health treatment as the sole or primary reason to pursue any action or proceeding related to harm or risk of harm. Under the bill, this treatment can be sought for mental health concerns including, among others, perinatal mood or anxiety disorders.

But the bill specifies that DCF can still (1) take action when a child is harmed or at risk of harm and (2) use mental health treatment evidence in an action or proceeding if otherwise authorized.

EFFECTIVE DATE: Upon passage

§ 16 — CONSIDERATION OF CHILD'S EXPRESSED OPINION IN DCF HOME VISITS

Requires DCF personnel to consider children's opinions during home visits when investigating a report of child abuse or neglect of a young child

By law, all DCF investigations into reports of child abuse or neglect for children from birth to age three must include a home visit to, among other things:

1. observe the child and any siblings;

2. evaluate the parents, home, and condition of other children living in the household; and
3. if appropriate, determine the nature and extent of, and who is responsible for, the reported abuse or neglect.

The bill requires that during these home visits, DCF personnel consider any opinions expressed by the child or other children living in the household about whether the child was abused or neglected.

EFFECTIVE DATE: October 1, 2026

§ 17 — PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

Requires DCF to conduct a campaign to increase public awareness of agency programs

Beginning July 1, 2027, the bill requires DCF to conduct a public awareness campaign to educate the public about the resources and services offered by the department. This must at least include the department's Office of Community Relations, housing and homelessness programs, the Careline (the 24-hour-a-day hotline and online portal for child abuse and neglect complaints), and text message programs. The campaign may include advertisements on television and social media.

EFFECTIVE DATE: October 1, 2026

§ 18 — PERSONAL EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION DEVICES FOR DCF STAFF DURING HOME VISITS

Requires DCF employees who do visits to the homes of children under DCF supervision to use personal emergency communication devices

The bill requires the DCF commissioner, beginning January 1, 2027, to require all DCF employees who regularly do visits to, or evaluations of, the homes of children under the commissioner's supervision to use personal emergency communication devices. The commissioner must also give the employees the devices and develop guidelines and a training program for their use.

The bill defines "personal emergency communication device" as a GPS-enabled, wearable device that allows an individual to contact local police by pressing a button or through another mechanism.

EFFECTIVE DATE: October 1, 2026

§ 19 — URGENT CRISIS CENTER

Requires DCF to establish and operate an urgent crisis center in Stamford for FY 27

The bill requires DCF to establish and operate an urgent crisis center in Stamford for FY 27. Urgent crisis centers are walk-in clinics that provide immediate access to mental health services for children who do not require medical emergency department care.

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2026

§ 20 — CHILD WELFARE POLICY AND OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

Establishes a Child Welfare Policy and Oversight Committee charged with making recommendations about the state agencies providing services relating to child welfare

The bill establishes a 28-member Child Welfare Policy and Oversight Committee. The committee is charged with evaluating and making recommendations about the operation, policies, and service outcomes of state agencies providing services relating to and supporting child welfare in the state. By January 1, 2028, the committee must submit its first annual report concerning its evaluation and recommendations to the Committee on Children.

The committee is made up of members named by position and appointed members. The members named by position are the (1) Committee on Children chairpersons and ranking members and (2) following agency heads or their designees: (a) the commissioners of Children and Families, Education, Mental Health and Addiction Services, Developmental Services, Social Services, Housing, and Correction, and (b) the Office of Policy and Management (OPM) secretary, the Chief Court Administrator, the Probate Court Administrator, the Chief Public Defender, and the Child Advocate.

Table: Appointed Committee Members

Appointing Authority	Number of Members	Qualifying Description
House speaker	2	One is a mental health professional employed at an urgent crisis center

Appointing Authority	Number of Members	Qualifying Description
Senate president pro tempore	2	One is a DCF regional social worker supervisor
House majority leader	2	One is a private provider of child welfare services
Senate majority leader	2	One is a licensed foster parent
House minority leader	2	One is an expert in child welfare employed by an in-state higher education institution
Senate minority leader	2	One is a relative or fictive kin caregiver with whom a child in DCF's care and custody has been placed

Any vacancy will be filled by the appointing authority. Members of the committee serve without compensation.

The Committee on Children chairpersons, or their designees, and the OPM secretary, or the secretary's designee, serve as co-chairpersons. The co-chairpersons must schedule the first committee meeting, which must be held within 60 days after the bill becomes law. The committee must meet quarterly, and more often upon the call of the co-chairpersons. The co-chairpersons may designate subcommittees to carry out committee duties.

The committee must complete its duties under the bill in consultation with one or more organizations that focus on child welfare-related issues, including an independent institution of higher education in the state offering a master's degree in social work. The committee can accept administrative support as well as technical and research assistance from any such organization.

EFFECTIVE DATE: October 1, 2026

§ 21 — FOSTER CARE LICENSURE REQUIREMENTS FOR RELATIVE AND FICTIVE KIN CAREGIVERS REPORT

Requires DCF to report on the feasibility of establishing foster care licensure requirements for relative and fictive kin caregivers

The bill requires DCF to report on the feasibility of establishing foster care licensure requirements specifically for relative and fictive kin

caregivers to the Committee on Children by January 1, 2027.

By law, a fictive kin caregiver is a person at least 21 years old who is unrelated to a child by birth, adoption, or marriage but has an emotionally significant relationship with either the child or child's family amounting to a familial relationship.

EFFECTIVE DATE: Upon passage

§ 22 — DCF AND DESPP COMMUNICATION IMPROVEMENT AND CHILD WELFARE POLICIES STUDY

Requires DCF and DESPP to study, and report on, improving their communication with one another and their policies on removing children from their homes

The bill requires DCF and the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection (DESPP) to study ways to improve (1) communication between DCF and DESPP on child welfare services and (2) existing policies and practices on removing children from their homes.

The bill also requires DCF and DESPP to report on their findings and associated recommendations to the Committee on Children by January 1, 2027.

EFFECTIVE DATE: Upon passage

§ 23 — IMMEDIATE REMOVAL FOR CHILD VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT FROM OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENTS REPORT

Requires DCF and OCA to study, and report on, ways to improve department policies and practices to ensure a child's immediate removal from an out-of-home placement if they become a victim of physical or sexual assault

The bill requires DCF and the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) to jointly study ways to improve department policies and practices to ensure children are immediately removed from out-of-home placements made by DCF if they become a victim of physical or sexual assault occurring in, or because of, the out-of-home placement (presumably, this would apply when the perpetrator was someone living in the home or with access to it).

The bill also requires DCF and OCA to report on findings of the study and associated recommendations to the Committee on Children by

January 1, 2027.

EFFECTIVE DATE: Upon passage

§ 24 — SUBSIDIZED GUARDIANSHIP PROGRAM

Requires the monthly guardianship subsidy for the needs of the child to be equal to, rather than not exceed, the foster care maintenance payment that would have otherwise been paid on behalf of the child

By law, the subsidized guardianship program provides three types of subsidies to help guardians and the children in their care. The bill requires that the monthly subsidy that is based on the circumstances of the caregiver and the needs of the child be equal to, rather than not exceed, the foster care maintenance payment that would have been paid for the child if the child had remained in licensed foster care. The current requirement only prevents the payment from being more than the foster care amount; it does not guarantee a certain payment amount.

The subsidy is paid on behalf of the child payable to the caregiver. The bill does not change the one-time special needs subsidy or the medical subsidy.

EFFECTIVE DATE: October 1, 2026

BACKGROUND

Related Bill

sHB 5270, favorably reported by the Committee on Children with a change of reference to the Appropriations Committee, raises the age from 21 to 26 years old for the DCF postsecondary education funding program.

COMMITTEE ACTION

Committee on Children

Joint Favorable Substitute

Yea 14 Nay 2 (03/05/2026)