

H.88 - An Act relative to accountability for vulnerable children and families.

Measuring the Impact of COVID-19

This bill requires the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to report on and analyze various aspects of the child welfare system to understand the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable children.

- **Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect (Section 26)**
 - Requires DCF to report monthly, for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis, on changes in child abuse and neglect reports made pursuant to section 51A of chapter 119.
- **Virtual Services (Section 25)**
 - Requires DCF to analyze the effect of virtual and video technology on services during the COVID-19 crisis. Report must include a plan for improving access to virtual and video technology services for children, families, and department staff.

Quality Improvement

This bill requires the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to create or update specific case management policies to improve agency operations and safeguard children in care.

- **Collateral Checks (Section 8)**
 - Requires human services programs receiving state funding, through Chapter 257 or MassHealth, to respond to DCF caseworkers conducting a collateral check within 5 business days.
- **Reunification Reviews (Section 13)**
 - Requires DCF to establish a formal internal review policy that creates a managerial review process prior to a decision to reunify children.
- **Attorney Notification of Change in Placement (Section 15)**
 - Requires DCF to notify a child or young adult's attorney of changes in placement or if the child or young adult is involved in a 51A report.
- **Case Transfers (Section 27)**
 - Requires DCF to review policies, procedures, and rules to improve protocol for complex cases involving multiple social workers and area offices. It requires this review to be conducted in consultation with the Child Advocate and to be reported to the Legislature.

Foster Parents (Section 14)

This bill establishes a foster parents' bill of rights to provide a clear articulation of rights and responsibilities that will be a helpful tool to retain and recruit foster parents.

- **Foster Parents' Bill of Rights**
 - Prevents discrimination of foster parents and requires DCF to keep information about foster parents confidential.
 - Requires training to be part of the onboarding process.
 - Provides foster parents with basic information regarding the foster child.
 - Requires DCF to provide notification and basic information regarding hearings, complaints process, and financial eligibility.

- Allows for the opportunity for foster parents, as part of the offboarding process, to share information on a child that could assist the child's future foster parent or adoptive parent with the child's everyday routine.

Data Reporting (Sections 8, 12, 16-18, 20, and 24)

The Department of Children and Families is required to report on key data and metrics throughout the General Laws and in the annual General Appropriations Act. This bill consolidates all department reporting requirements into one section of the General Laws. It repeals instances of these reports throughout the General Laws and FY20 budget so the new reports, including annual reports and quarterly profiles, can be issued with this data and information.

This bill requires DCF to notify the Legislature of new regulations or if any report is not submitted by the deadline.

Reporting requirements include:

- Annual report
 - Requires an annual report to be submitted by October 31 that provides an overview of the department's performance during the previous fiscal year.
- Quarterly profile
 - Requires a quarterly profile to be submitted within 60 days after the end of each fiscal quarter that includes departmental, regional office, and area office data.
- Transition planning for children in foster care
 - Requires an annual report to be submitted by October 31 on the outcomes of children and young adults leaving or aging out of DCF care and custody, including demographics, counts, and whether they have secured housing, employment, and post-secondary education.
- Fair hearing processes and cases
 - Requires an annual report to be submitted by October 31 on DCF's fair hearing process and cases. This language is generally included in 4800-0015 of the General Appropriations Act.
- Services provided through contracted agencies
 - Requires an annual report to be submitted by November 30 summarizing the services provided, the number of clients served, and the amount spent by the Department on contracted services.

Task Force on Child Welfare Data Reporting (Section 21)

This bill updates the charge of the task force on child welfare data reporting that was established in the FY18 budget.

Strengthening the Integrity of the Child Advocate (Sections 1, 9-11)

This bill transfers the child fatality review team from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner to the Office of the Child Advocate.