

Senate reforms emerge as House approves child welfare bill

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Sen. Robyn Kennedy and Rep. Jay Livingstone co-chair a Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities hearing on Monday, Oct. 16, 2023.

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, OCT. 22, 2025....The House passed a reform bill Wednesday that expands reporting responsibilities at the Department of Children and Families, strengthens the role of the Office of the Child Advocate, and bolsters collaboration around new school placements for children in state custody.

Ahead of the vote, Senate members of the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities began advancing a separate slate of child welfare proposals, including establishing a bill of rights for children in foster care, establishing addi-

tional mandated reporters aimed at preventing child abuse and neglect, creating an "electronic backpack" for students' educational records, and enhancing child welfare protections.

Committee co-chair Rep. Jay Livingstone said the House bill (H 4644) is based on years of collaboration and input from "numerous partners and advocates to strengthen oversight, transparency and accountability within our state's child welfare system."

"The central purpose of the legislation is simple: To ensure that every child in the commonwealth that comes in contact with the Department of Children and Families receives the protection, stability and opportunity they deserve," said Livingstone, a Boston Democrat.

The House passed the bill on a 159-1 vote, with Republican Rep. John Gaskey of Carver opposing the measure.

Speaker Pro Tempore Kate of Hogan, who presided over the session, sidelined a Gaskey amendment that sought to remove legal protections for schools, museums and libraries tied to the intentional dissemination of harmful materials to minors. Gaskey did not comment on his proposal on the House floor.

Democratic Rep. Alice Peisch of Wellesley rose in objection when the House Clerk began reading the amendment. Peisch argued the amendment was "beyond the scope" of the bill.

"The bill reorganizes and regulates the Department of Children and Families and the Office of the Child Advocate, and concerns child welfare administration and oversight," Peisch said. "The amendment proposes to amend Chapter 272 of the General Laws relative to criminal obscenity, which is a separate and unrelated subject not contained in the bill or in any of the matters upon which it is based."

Hogan agreed with Peisch and ruled that the amendment be laid aside, which ended consideration of the issue.

The House adopted a Rep. David LeBoeuf amendment to establish a commission to study how to create and implement a "digital education portfolio system" aimed at supporting the educational stability and well-being of foster children. A Rep. Jim O'Day proposal updating the child fatality review team membership also passed.

The Senate side of the the committee redrafted seven proposals to accompany a co-chair Sen. Robyn Kennedy bill (S 148) child welfare bill which received a favorable report.

Kennedy's bill would require DCF to release public reports on performance, including metrics on child welfare cases, placement outcomes, racial disparities and service

delivery. New mandates would include notification to lawmakers if a child sleeps in a DCF office overnight, and annual reports on services to young adults over 18.

The 41-page bill also directs the Office of the Child Advocate to offer mandated reporter training and family support resources.

The other bills that received a report to accompany Kennedy's bill include Sen. Jo Comerford's "foster child bill of rights" (S 107). Similar protections were enshrined for foster parents in a 2023 law.

The list of proposed rights, which must be accessible and easily understandable by foster kids, would touch upon protections surrounding safety and security; connections to family, community and identity; and access to health care, including reproductive and gender-identity care. It would also outline access to a DCF caseworker, plus 24/7 access to an emergency number, education and the right to an attorney.

Sen. Ryan Fattman's "electronic backpack" bill (S 125) is similar to the LeBoeuf amendment. It requires DCF to develop and maintain an "electronic backpack" for all children in the foster care system to ensure that when children change schools or houses, they carry their educational and medical records with them.

Other bills on the Senate slate include those to create more mandated reporters (S 127), expand training for mandated reporters (S 129), provide bereavement support for parents when an autopsy is required for their child (S 159), streamline access to academic records for students in an out-of-home placement (S 2582) and establish a state child fatality review team within the Office of the Child Advocate (S 133).

Alison Kuznitz and Sam Drysdale are reporters for State House News Service and State Affairs Pro Massachusetts. Reach them at akuznitz@stateaffairs.com or sdrysdale@statehousenews.com.