

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1544

As Reported by House Committee On:
Early Learning & Human Services

Title: An act relating to the risk assessment process used by the department of children, youth, and families when investigating alleged child abuse and neglect referrals.

Brief Description: Improving the risk assessment process used when investigating alleged child abuse and neglect referrals.

Sponsors: Representatives Rule, Hill, Davis, Reed and Ormsby.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Early Learning & Human Services: 2/4/25, 2/7/25 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Requires the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) to conduct a study to improve its risks, strengths, and needs assessment tool used in the risk assessment process when investigating alleged child abuse and neglect referrals.
- Requires that the DCYF risk assessment process used when investigating child abuse and neglect referrals be certified at least once every three years based on current academic standards for assessment validation.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EARLY LEARNING & HUMAN SERVICES

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 11 members: Representatives Bergquist, Chair; Cortes, Vice Chair; Eslick, Ranking Minority Member; Burnett, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Bernbaum, Dent, Goodman, Hill, Ortiz-Self, Penner and Taylor.

Staff: Luke Wickham (786-7146).

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Background:

Reports of Child Abuse or Neglect.

If an individual suspects that a child has been abused or neglected, that abuse or neglect can be reported to the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) Child Protective Services (CPS) office, or to law enforcement. There are many individuals who are required by law to report suspected abuse or neglect.

The CPS will then determine whether the report of child abuse or neglect is credible and whether the report meets the sufficiency screening criteria. If the report meets the screening criteria, CPS will assign either a 24-hour response that includes an investigation or a family assessment response for low- to moderate-risk allegations that require a 72-hour response.

Within 30 days of the intake screening, a DCYF caseworker uses information gathered to assess the safety of the children in the home. If there is an active safety threat, the caseworker conducts a safety plan assessment to determine whether a safety plan can be developed that maintains the child in the home. The DCYF will take steps to remove the child from the home when there are active safety threats and the safety plan analysis indicates that a safety plan cannot keep the child safe in the home. If the caseworker determines that the child should be removed, the DCYF will hold a safe child consultation that includes the area administrator, caseworker, and several other people to collectively determine whether further steps may be taken to establish a safety plan that will allow the child to remain in the home.

The DCYF uses a structured decision-making risk assessment tool when investigating or assessing allegations of child abuse or neglect.

The DCYF is beginning a pilot where 24 caseworkers will use a new tool based on motivational interviewing to flag safety threats, identify risks, identify appropriate questions to ask the family, allow the family to identify goals, and map case plan development. This pilot will last six months.

If a report of child abuse or neglect is investigated by the DCYF, the DCYF must complete the investigation within at least 90 days, unless law enforcement or the prosecuting attorney has determined that a longer investigation is necessary. At the completion of the investigation, the DCYF must make a finding that the report of child abuse or neglect is founded or unfounded. A "founded" determination means that it is more likely than not that child abuse or neglect did occur. An "unfounded" determination means that available information indicates that, more likely than not, child abuse or neglect did not occur, or that there is insufficient evidence for the DCYF to determine that it did or did not occur.

If a court in a civil or criminal proceeding, considering the same facts as contained in the report investigated by the DCYF, makes a finding by a preponderance of the evidence or higher that the subject of the investigation abused or neglected the child, the DCYF

must adopt that finding.

Office of Innovation, Alignment, and Accountability.

The Office of Innovation, Alignment, and Accountability is an office within the DCYF that directs efforts related to innovation, alignment, integration, collaboration, and system reform.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

Risks, Strengths, and Needs Assessment Tool.

The Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) is required to conduct a study to improve its risks, strengths, and needs assessment tool used in the risk assessment process when investigating alleged child abuse and neglect referrals to:

- identify family risks, strengths, cultural strengths, and needs;
- identify the risk of harm to a child when a substance use disorder is a factor in the case or high potency synthetic opioids are a condition in the home, that incorporates guidance from the Department of Health regarding high potency synthetic opioids and child safety;
- determine the culturally appropriate service needs of the family and support caseworkers to appropriate available services quickly;
- support reassessment and monitoring of family progress; and
- ensure that the assessment tool incorporates evidence-based practices to address cultural bias.

By November 1, 2025, the DCYF must provide data and information to the Legislature on its efforts to improve the risks, strengths, and needs assessment tool, including feedback provided by the Office of Tribal Relations within the DCYF.

Risk Assessment Process when Investigating Child Abuse and Neglect.

Requires that the DCYF risk assessment process used when investigating child abuse and neglect referrals to be certified at least once every three years based on current academic standards for assessment validation. This certification may be completed by the Office of Innovation, Alignment, and Accountability or an outside researcher.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute bill requires that the study to improve the Department of Children, Youth, and Families' (DCYF) risks, strengths, and needs assessment tool:

- includes cultural strengths;
- incorporates guidance from the Department of Health regarding high potency synthetic opioids and child safety;
- determines the culturally appropriate service needs of the family;
- incorporates evidence-based practices to address cultural bias; and

- includes feedback from the Office of Tribal Relations within the DCYF.
-

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) This is similar to a bill that was heard last year and almost made it through. This is a really important bill because it proposes to improve the process that caseworkers use to determine whether a child should be removed from the care of parents and guardians. This process needs to be done in an unbiased method using evidence-based methods.

Social workers have been asking for this bill because they want to have every tool in their toolbox to be able to make the right decisions in a very difficult time.

Domestic violence is one of the things that is not currently being assessed and that can be one of the most fatal things that can happen in a child abuse situation.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Representative Alicia Rule, prime sponsor.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.