

LEGISLATIVE FISCAL ESTIMATE

[First Reprint]

SENATE, No. 3207

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

220th LEGISLATURE

DATED: AUGUST 2, 2023

SUMMARY

- Synopsis:** Requires assignment of kinship guardian advocate upon petition of caregiver to be appointed kinship legal guardian.
- Type of Impact:** Annual State expenditure increase.
- Agencies Affected:** Department of Children and Families.

Office of Legislative Services Estimate

Fiscal Impact	<u>Annual</u>
State Expenditure Increase	Up to \$1,000,000

- The Office of Legislative (OLS) estimates that this bill will increase State costs up to \$1 million annually. Costs under the bill may include annual expenses incurred by kinship agencies to hire additional staff and to train existing and new staff to provide legal advocacy services, as well as one-time technological costs to support the assignment and tracking of a caregiver to a single advocate. To the extent that kinship agencies do not currently implement, or cannot realign existing staff resources to implement, the provisions of the bill regarding the appointment of a kinship guardian advocate to provide legal advocacy services to certain caregivers, the costs of this bill will fall at the higher end of this range.

BILL DESCRIPTION

This bill requires the Department of Children and Families, upon petition of a caregiver to be appointed as kinship legal guardian of a child, to appoint a kinship guardian advocate to the caregiver to provide legal advocacy services throughout the kinship legal guardianship process. As defined in the bill, “kinship guardian advocate” means an employee of a kinship agency, contracted with the department to provide support services through the kinship navigator program, who is assigned by the department to advocate for a caregiver petitioning the court to be appointed a kinship legal guardian and for the child with whom the caregiver has a kinship relationship.

FISCAL ANALYSIS

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

None received.

OFFICE OF LEGISLATIVE SERVICES

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Currently, to apply for kinship legal guardianship, a caregiver must contact the Kinship Navigator Program in the Department of Children and Families. The Kinship Navigator Program will assign the caregiver to one of four kinship agencies contracted with the department to administer the program: CarePlus NJ, the Salvation Army, Children's Home Society, and the Center for Family Services. The kinship agency will then conduct an assessment of the caregiver and the caregiver's home. The assessment must be completed before a court action for kinship legal guardianship can be filed. When the assessment is completed, the caregiver will file it, along with a petition to start the kinship legal guardianship process, with the court. It is possible that the kinship agency staff conducting this assessment will also be able to function as the kinship guardian advocate under the bill.

The department anticipates that the Kinship Navigator Program will cost the State \$10.0 million in FY 2024, with the average annual cost per client at \$8,258. A \$1.0 million increase in State costs under this bill would reflect a 10 percent increase in the cost of the program. Furthermore, the average daily population of children placed with a kinship legal guardian in FY 2024 is projected to be 1,207. In addition to the assessment described above, the program also provides help with the following: referrals to grandparenting and family support groups; accessing medical coverage and services; housing; and payment for furniture, clothing, tutoring, and extracurricular activities for the child. The OLS notes that several of the kinship agencies indicate on their websites and printed materials that their kinship programs also include the provision of assistance for caregivers who seek legal guardianship status.

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This legislative fiscal estimate has been produced by the Office of Legislative Services due to the failure of the Executive Branch to respond to our request for a fiscal note.

This fiscal estimate has been prepared pursuant to P.L.1980, c.67 (C.52:13B-6 et seq.).