

SENATE HEALTH, HUMAN SERVICES AND SENIOR CITIZENS COMMITTEE

STATEMENT TO **SENATE, No. 3723**

with committee amendments

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DATED: DECEMBER 6, 2021

The Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee reports favorably Senate Bill No. 3723 with committee amendments.

As amended by the committee, this bill requires the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to establish policies and procedures to detect and investigate incidents of child abuse and neglect and to promote child abuse prevention techniques that are to be employed for the duration of any public health emergency declared pursuant to P.L.2005, c.222 (C.26:13-1 et seq.) that necessitates the use of social distancing and other restrictions on person-to-person contact.

The policies and procedures are to include, but not be limited to: (1) publicizing the DCF's State Central Registry, as well as providing instructions for calling 911 for emergencies, and directions to assist the public in accessing the DCF's website and social media platforms to obtain more information on reporting child abuse and neglect; (2) allowing a child protective investigator assigned to investigate an incident of child abuse and neglect to perform some of the investigator's responsibilities, if appropriate, remotely by telephone, computer, or other means of live audio or video communication; (3) allowing a permanency worker assigned to a child under the DCF's care, custody, and supervision to provide case management services, if appropriate, remotely by telephone, computer, or other means of live audio or video communication; (4) allowing the family of a child under the department's care, custody, and supervision to access services remotely by telephone, computer, or other means of live audio or video communication, as may be appropriate; (5) providing for the preparation and dissemination of literature and other resource materials prepared by the department which: inform parents of factors that contribute to incidents of child abuse and neglect and the legal ramifications of abusing or neglecting a child; highlight the services provided by the State which help in preventing child abuse and neglect; provide tips on child safety; and reinforce positive parenting skills; and (6) providing for the regular review and analysis, by the department, of the State's child abuse reporting requirements as may

be necessary in order for the department to develop and implement strategies to better detect and investigate incidents of child abuse and neglect during public health emergencies that require social distancing or other restrictions on person-to-person contact.

Under the provisions of the bill, the DCF, in consultation with the Department of Education (DOE), is required to establish a public awareness campaign to inform the general public about: protecting children from child abuse and neglect during public health emergencies that require social distancing, remote learning, or other restrictions on person-to-person contact; and the policies and procedures established under the bill.

The bill also requires the DCF to prepare a fact sheet on the information provided through the public awareness campaign, to make the fact sheet available to the public by electronic or other means of distribution, and to post the fact sheet on its Internet website and the Internet websites of the DOE and the Departments of Health and Human Services.

The DCF is to collect and analyze data on all records of child abuse reports made during the public health emergency declared in response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and issue a report, no later than one year after the effective date of the bill, to the Governor and the Legislature providing: a summary of the data on child abuse reports compiled by the DCF; comparative information about child abuse reports made during the COVID-19 pandemic and child abuse reports made prior to the pandemic; and any recommendations for legislation or regulatory changes in the reporting of cases of child abuse and neglect during a public health emergency that requires social distancing or other restrictions on person-to-person contact.

As amended, the bill requires the DOE and the DCF to develop an online training program for school employees on the detection and prevention of child abuse, inclusive of how to do so during a public health emergency that requires remote learning, social distancing, or other restrictions on person-to-person contact. The online training program is to be made available to all school districts in the State, free of charge, to assist districts in meeting all requirements established under State law to train school employees on the identification, detection, reporting, and response to issues of child abuse. The training program is to in consultation with education and private entities with expertise in the detection of child abuse and neglect as well as child abuse and neglect prevention techniques and include, but not be limited to, information on the signs of child abuse and neglect, how to assess the safety of a child, and in what ways the signs can be detected and a child safety assessment can be conducted in person and virtually.

The DOE, in consultation with the DCF, is also to require every school district in the State, during a public health emergency that

requires remote learning, social distancing, or other restrictions on person-to-person contact, to: (1) allow students and their families to remotely access, by telephone, computer, or other means of live audio or video communication, information about the DCF's Family Helpline and other telephone hotlines that offer peer support, clinical, or counseling services to children who are at risk of child abuse or neglect and their families; and (2) provide a behavioral health assessment, remotely by telephone, computer, or other means of live audio or video communication, to every student who is deemed at-risk of child abuse or neglect as determined by a school psychologist, school counselor, or school social worker.

COMMITTEE AMENDMENTS:

The committee amendments remove from the bill certain requirements for the DCF to take actions specific to the public health emergency declared in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The committee amendments move a section requiring the DCF to analyze and produce a report concerning the reporting of child abuse and neglect during the COVID-19 pandemic to a new, separate section.

The committee amendments revise the requirement for the DOE to develop a training program concerning child abuse and neglect during a public health emergency to provide that: 1) the training specific to public health emergencies will be a component of a larger training program; 2) the training program is to be an online program; 3) the training program will be made available, without charge, to all school districts in the State to assist in meeting training requirements for school employees related to child abuse and neglect; and 4) the training program is to be developed in consultation with education and private entities with expertise in issues related to detecting, reporting, and preventing child abuse and neglect.

The committee amendments make various technical changes to improve clarity and make corrections involving grammar, structure, formatting, and syntax.