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Senate Passes Bill to Increase Reporting Requirements for Department of Children and Families *Also establishes a Foster Parent Bill of Rights and Increases Access to Mental Health Care*

(Boston—08/03/2020) The State Senate moved Friday, July 31st to pass a bill introducing new oversight and reporting requirements for the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF). *An Act relative to accountability for vulnerable children and families* also moves the child fatality review board to the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA), establishes a ‘Foster Parent Bill of Rights,’ and increases access to mental health care for children in the Commonwealth.

“Having worked closely with victims of abuse, I know how important it is to have clarity in what can often be a long-term, and strenuous process for those we are trying to help,” commented **Senator Anne M. Gobi (D-Spencer), Senate Chair of the Joint Committee on Higher Education**. “The updates made in this law will provide that pathway for children and foster parents, while increasing access via tele-health and expanded emergency department services to ensure that appropriate treatment is given.”

“This bill represents an important step towards increased accountability in the child welfare system,” stated **Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz (D-Boston), co-chair of the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities**. “While we must continue to push for improved data collection on racial disparities and LGBTQ+ youth, this legislation will strengthen transparency and increase support for system-involved children and families.”

Under the bill, DCF would be required to publish consolidated annual reports and quarterly profiles, establish a 3-year plan with targets for safety, permanence and well-being outcomes for children, and submit a report on young adults who continue to receive services after reaching the age of 18. The bill also updates reporting requirements that are outdated, irrelevant or duplicative, and requires DCF and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to develop clear plans for maintaining close contact with, and providing quality education to, children who have open cases with DCF during the COVID-19 state of emergency.

To increase access to vital mental health care for children in care, the bill eliminates prior authorization for mental health acute treatment for children experiencing acute mental health crises. It also requires emergency departments to have the capacity to evaluate and stabilize a person admitted with a mental health presentation at all times, and to refer them to appropriate treatment or inpatient admission, expediting the

process for individuals under 22 years old. Additionally, the bill establishes a pilot program, administered by the Department of Public Health, to increase student access to tele-behavioral health services in schools.

The bill seeks to increase support for, and grow the pool of, foster parents in the Commonwealth through the establishment of a 'Foster Parent Bill of Rights.' Specifically, the bill includes several key rights important to foster families, including: access to training and resources; the right to appropriate communication between DCF, courts, and others involved with caring for the child; the right to be free from all forms of discrimination in carrying out their duties as foster parents; the ability to exercise rights without fear of repercussions; and establishing a reasonable and prudent parenting standard.

An Act relative to accountability for vulnerable children and families now moves to the House of Representatives for further action.

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