



State of Connecticut

DIVISION OF PUBLIC DEFENDER SERVICES

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Testimony of Office of Chief Public Defender Renee Cimino, Director of Delinquency Defense and Child Protection

H.B. 5004 - AN ACT CONCERNING CHILD WELFARE ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

JOINT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN - MARCH 3, 2026

The Office of Chief Public Defender (OCPD) supports *H.B. 5004, An Act Concerning Child Welfare Accountability and Transparency*. However, OCPD requests that in **Section 10**, the maximum age a youth who voluntarily remains in Department of Children and Families (DCF) services post majority can access postsecondary education grants be **raised to age twenty-six (26)**. OCPD also requests that in **Section 20, OCPD be included as a member** of the Child Welfare Policy and Oversight Committee.

Section 1-2. This office supports requiring DCF to make an emergency placement of a child with a relative or fictive kin caregiver who has not been licensed or approved if such emergency placement is in the best interest of the child, a satisfactory home visit is conducted, and a basic assessment of the family is completed.

Section 4. This office supports requiring DCF to provide grant payments for clothing, food, safety-related purchases, and other necessities for children to caregivers, individuals who have accepted emergency placement of a child, and a parent anticipating near-term reunification.

Section 5. This office supports the establishment of a grant program to provide payments to caregivers for all costs associated with after-school programs. These programs will take place after regular school hours and provide educational, enrichment, and recreational activities for children in grades kindergarten through twelve.

Section 10. This office supports the creation of a postsecondary education grant program to fund postsecondary education for youth who voluntarily remain in DCF services post majority.

However, the legislation as currently written would limit the current DCF postsecondary education assistance policy that allows youth to participate up to age twenty-four (24) with Commissioner's approval.¹

While in support, **OCPD is requesting that the age to access these grants be extended to age twenty-six (26)** for these vulnerable youth emerging from the child welfare system. Extending postsecondary tuition assistance up to age 26 will safeguard access to academic success for vulnerable youth who often face socioeconomic barriers, requiring a longer timeline to achieve stability and independence. These barriers can result in failure to meet attendance guidelines and/or to be identified for special education services.

Section 20. This office **requests that the Chief Public Defender be added to the membership of the Child Welfare Policy and Oversight Committee.** The Division of Public Defender Services (DPDS) provides representation for indigent parents and all children when abuse, neglect, and termination of parental rights petitions are filed by DCF. The expertise of the Chief Public Defender in these areas will allow for valuable input in evaluating and making recommendations concerning the operation, policies, and service outcomes of state agencies providing services relating to and supporting child welfare in the state.

Thank you for your consideration of OCPD's position on this bill. **With the suggested changes proposed by this Office to Sections 10 and 20, OCPD requests that the Committee vote favorably on this bill.**

¹ <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/dcf/policy/policy-and-practice-guides/2024/3-2-1-pse-policy-final-102024.pdf>