

DATE: February 27, 2020

BILL NUMBER: HB 1342 **COMMITTEE:** Judiciary

BILL TITLE: Family Law – Removal of Child From Home – Meetings

DHR POSITION: Letter of Information

The Department of Human Services (DHS) respectfully submits this letter of information regarding House Bill 1342. House Bill 1342 would require that at any meeting of a local department of social services during which the removal of a child from the child's home is discussed, specific information be redacted and prohibited from being referenced.

Fair and impartial assessments of the needs of children and families are an important issue for child welfare and human service agencies. This is why DHS' Social Services Administration's has developed an Integrated Practice Model with guiding principles which center around cultural and linguistic responsiveness. This Integrated Practice Model has an intentional emphasis on implicit bias and power differential in relationships with families, cultural humility, and building authentic partnerships with families.

According to DHS policy and practice expectations, any time a local department is considering the removal of a child from a child's home and the child is not at imminent risk, the department conducts a Family Involvement Meeting (FIM) to discuss options to divert the removal and develop a safety plan. As outlined in DHS policy, FIMs are defined as a case work practice designed to convene family members during key child welfare decision points with the goal of developing plans that support the safest and least restrictive placement for a child, as well as permanency and well-being options.

Family Involvement Meetings are required prior to any removal or as soon as possible after any removal occurs. These meetings require the presence and participation of family members. By necessity, information about the child and the child's parents will likely be revealed, such as: their names, genders, and race or ethnicity. Additionally, because the meetings are designed to engage the family in all aspects of the decision-making process and their preferences, needs, and problem-solving ideas are the central focus, it is likely that further information about religious and political affiliation or beliefs, as well as education type preference will need to be discussed.

For local departments these meetings are part of the official record and it is through the documentation of these discussions that as an agency we are able to report on efforts to prevent removals. In addition, by redacting some of this information, local departments would face unique challenges in providing the necessary and effective services to children and families as the Department is committed to making every effort to keep children in their community of origin if a removal is needed. It is the mission of the Department to aggressively pursue opportunities to protect Maryland's vulnerable children and to support families as the first resource for the well-being of their children. An individualized approach, which considers many of the elements listed in this bill as needing to be redacted and prohibited from discussion, ultimately serves both children and their families better.

The Department appreciates the opportunity to share the aforementioned information regarding HB 1342 and respectfully requests this information be taken into account during the Committee's deliberations.

