



SB0770 – Applicants for Positions Involving Direct Contact with Minors – Required Information, Review Process, and Reporting - Alterations
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
February 21, 2025

Position: SUPPORT

Center for Hope, LifeBridge Health **strongly supports SB0770 – Applicants for Positions Involving Direct Contact with Minors – Required Information, Review Process, and Reporting – Alterations.**

Center for Hope, a subsidiary of the regional medical system LifeBridge Health, includes the third oldest nationally accredited child advocacy center in the nation and the first in Maryland. Since 2010, Center for Hope has trained professionals, youth-serving organizations, community members, and many others on violence intervention and prevention and how to protect the vulnerable. With pioneering approaches to preventing the abuse of children and youth, and youth-serving organizational policy development, Center for Hope's experts indirectly improve the lives of tens of thousands of people across the country each year. Center for Hope has studied the repeated failures of mandatory reporters and youth-serving organizations and understands the extent to which appropriate policies and education can improve outcomes for children and youth. Center for Hope has collaboratively assessed, designed, and assisted with the implementation of child and youth protection policies as well as training for institutions and organizations throughout the nation.

SB0770 enhances and expands systems to protect children from sexual abuse and sexual misconduct through several modifications to bills passed in 2018 (HB 1072) and 2019 (HB 486). These bills required Maryland public and private schools to train staff about sexual abuse and sexual misconduct, develop a code of conduct for school staff, and conduct pre-employment screening for acts of sexual abuse or misconduct during prior employment.

SB0770 improves the 2018 and 2019 legislation by:

1. Expanding current training, code of conduct, and background check requirements to include child care centers and youth-serving organizations;
2. Including definitions of boundary-violating behavior and youth serving organizations;
3. Requiring schools, child care centers, and youth-serving organizations to request Child Protective Services (CPS) background clearances from the Department of Human Services prior to employment;
4. Requiring County Boards of Education to submit an annual report to the Maryland State Department of Education delineating the training developed and implemented, and the policies and procedures for screening applicants; and
5. Requiring County Boards of Education to share with MSDE the employee codes of conduct for the county board and each non-public school and contracting agency in the county.

Centers for Disease Control (CDC) states screening for child sexual abuse prevention should be integrated into the general screening and selection process that organizations already employ to choose the best possible candidates for positions. Youth-serving organizations need to know about an applicant's previous boundary issues, criminal histories of sexual offenses, violence against youth, and other violent criminal offenses. Youth-serving organizations must be able to assess the background and interests of applicants as early and as fully as possible. It must be determined if adults have clear boundaries and ethical standards for their conduct with youth.

The organization's inquiry or request for a background check screening demonstrates the organization's seriousness about protecting children and youth and will discourage applicants at risk for perpetrating child sexual abuse. Research shows that a significant percentage of all cases of child sexual abuse occur through organizations that serve children and youth, including schools, child care centers, churches, sports clubs, and other youth-serving organizations. Perpetrators may seek employment with these organizations because they recognize the opportunity to be with children and to find a place to groom possible victims.

SB0770 establishes multiple layers of protection to prevent children from being sexually abused:

Background checks: Schools, child care centers and youth serving organizations will be required to complete several different background checks for prospective employees, which each capture different information:

- **Criminal Background Checks:** All currently conduct criminal background checks. However, most instances of child sexual abuse do not result in a criminal conviction.
- **CPS background checks:** Will help identify confirmed instances of abuse that may not have led to a criminal prosecution or conviction.
- **Prior Employment Checks on Sexual Abuse, Misconduct, and Boundary-Violating Behavior:** This will alert prospective employers about behavior that is exploitative, inappropriate, harmful, and/or unwanted, which may not meet the legal definition of abuse, but serves as a red flag for possible future abusive behavior.

Hampered by inadequate access to complete employee background information, child care centers and youth-serving organizations unwittingly hire staff accused of boundary issues or inappropriate behavior with children and youth. In some situations, employees who have been accused of boundary-violating behavior with children or youth are dismissed and the employer is not able to alert future employers.

Education and Clear Policies on Interactions with Children: Staff who interact with children will receive training about interactions with children that may violate boundaries, enabling them to identify potential grooming behavior in others and address it before a child is abused. Clear policies set a standard for appropriate behavior and for potential disciplinary action.

Monitoring and Compliance: Ensures that schools, child care centers and child serving organizations are following the law and doing what they need to do to protect children.

SB0770 would prevent employees of child care centers and youth-serving organizations with a track record of disregarding laws, policies, and codes of conduct related to boundary issues with children and youth from moving from one organization to another without consequence or question. If we hope to end child sexual abuse, we need to engage all organizations who serve children and youth as leaders in the prevention effort, to help them become places where perpetrators cannot work, and where policies and practices at every level better protect children and youth in their care.

For all the above stated reasons, we request a favorable report for SB0770.

For more information, please contact:

Alison D'Alessandro

Senior Policy and Program Specialist, Center for Hope

adalessa@lifebridgehealth.org

Phone: 410-804-6866

Jennifer Witten

Vice President of Government Relations and Community Development, LifeBridge Health

jwitten2@lifebridgehealth.org