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*The Maryland House of Delegates*  
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**House Joint Resolution 4 Social Services Administration - Accountability - Protecting  
Maryland's Most Vulnerable**

Chairwoman Healey, Vice Chairman Holmes, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to present HJ4 Social Services Administration - Accountability - Protecting Maryland's Most Vulnerable. The State must take accountability for long-standing failures in enforcing safety standards within Maryland's foster care and guardianship systems. A recent audit revealed systemic lapses dating back to 2008, demonstrating a troubling pattern of insufficient oversight and weak enforcement across the State's child welfare system. Children deserve safe, stable homes that support healthy development and successful reunification with their families whenever possible. The State has a fundamental responsibility to ensure that every child placed in a guardianship or foster setting is protected from harm and supported in a nurturing environment.

This resolution is also necessary to reaffirm Maryland's commitment to the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of children under the care of the Social Services Administration (SSA). It emphasizes a clear and essential principle: no child should be placed in a home with adults convicted of disqualifying crimes, and the State must uphold all laws governing custodial guardianship and child welfare placements.

The audit exposed severe safety breakdowns that require immediate corrective action. Among the most alarming findings was that seven registered sex offenders were living at addresses approved as guardianship homes for ten children as of August 2024—without the Administration's knowledge. In another case, an individual convicted of sexual assault of a minor was employed by a group foster care home and was later charged with crimes involving children in his care. Auditors also found that another individual working with foster youth had a prior murder conviction, which should have disqualified that person from employment altogether.

Oversight failures extend beyond background checks and staffing concerns and have placed children at risk of abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The audit found that 640 children had gone more than a year without receiving a required medical examination, while 110 children had gone as long as six years without one. In addition, more than 1,600 children had not received required dental exams, including 140 children who had never received one at all. These failures represent serious health risks and violate basic child welfare standards designed to ensure the well-being of children in State care.

Local departments also routinely failed to investigate allegations of abuse and neglect in a timely manner. Between January 2023 and June 2024, 22 local offices took more than a month to investigate reports, while 10 offices delayed investigations by seven months or more. In five offices, investigations were not completed at all during the entire 18-month period reviewed. These delays leave children in potentially dangerous situations without intervention or protection.

Compounding these problems is the lack of effective quality assurance and oversight systems. The audit found that the Social Services Administration has not implemented consistent, statewide mechanisms to monitor local departments or ensure compliance with child welfare requirements. Without strong oversight and accountability, systemic failures can persist unnoticed for years.

Financial mismanagement further harms the system and diverts resources that should be supporting vulnerable children. The audit documented nearly \$700,000 in federal penalties for failing to meet foster care service requirements, a loss of almost \$23 million due to failures in eligibility redetermination, nearly \$5 million in uncollected provider overpayments, and payments to a state university for child welfare services that lacked proper documentation or verification.

Maryland invests approximately \$360 million annually in foster care services, yet children continue to fall through the cracks. With roughly 24,000 children served statewide and approximately 12,500 participating providers and foster parents, strong oversight is essential to ensure that these significant public resources are used effectively, responsibly, and in the best interests of the children they are meant to serve.

The urgency of reform is underscored by the tragic death of Kanaiyah Ward. A child under the supervision of the Maryland Department of Human Services, she was found dead on September 22 at the Residence Inn by Marriott Baltimore at The Johns Hopkins Medical Campus. The audit also found that some children under State supervision were staying in hotels for extended periods—ranging from three months to as long as two years—despite the fact that such placements are intended only as short-term emergency measures. These circumstances highlight the urgent need for stronger accountability and immediate corrective action to ensure that children in Maryland’s care are protected and placed in safe, stable environments.

While numerous bills have been introduced this session to strengthen oversight and accountability within the Social Services Administration, House Joint Resolution 4 reinforces an essential principle: the State must fully enforce the protections that are already established in law. The resolution underscores that existing safeguards are not optional and must be consistently applied to protect children in State care. In particular, it affirms that no child should ever be placed in a home with adults convicted of disqualifying crimes and that the State must strictly uphold all laws governing custodial guardianship and child welfare placements.

A central purpose of the resolution is to address longstanding concerns about oversight and accountability within the Social Services Administration. Findings from the Office of Legislative Audits revealed serious failures, including not ensuring that foster children received required medical and dental examinations, failing to conduct timely investigations of abuse and neglect, mishandling eligibility redeterminations, failing to pursue provider overpayments, and inconsistencies in payments and work agreements. The resolution also recognizes the broader concern that there has been insufficient quality assurance and oversight of local departments administering child welfare programs.

In response to these issues, the resolution formally urges the Social Services Administration to strictly comply with existing State laws and regulations governing child welfare. It calls on the agency to ensure that guardianship homes and related facilities are properly certified and to implement the recommendations identified in the legislative audit. By doing so, the resolution aims to strengthen safeguards that protect children from abuse and neglect and ensure that the systems responsible for their care operate with greater accountability and transparency.

Thank you for your time and I urge a favorable report on House Joint Resolution 4.

Yours truly,



Nicholaus R. Kipke