Committee on Children
JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: SB-452
Title: AN ACT ESTABLISHING THE STATE OVERSIGHT COUNCIL ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES.
Vote Date: 3/12/2019
Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute
PH Date: 3/5/2019
File No.: 

**Disclaimer:** The following JOINT FAVORABLE Report is prepared for the benefit of the members of the General Assembly, solely for purposes of information, summarization and explanation and does not represent the intent of the General Assembly or either chamber thereof for any purpose.

**SPONSORS OF BILL:**

Committee on Children
Sen. Leonard A. Fasano, 34th Dist.
Sen. Kevin D. Witkos, 8th Dist.
Sen. Heather B. Somers, 18th Dist.

**REASONS FOR BILL:**

This bill would create a State Oversight Council on Children and Families to replace the State Advisory Council on Children and Families. This bill would also require the State Oversight Council on Children and Families to report annually to the joint standing committees of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to appropriations and children.

**RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:**

**Vannessa Dorantes, Commissioner, Department of Children and Families:**
The commissioner testified in opposition to this bill. It is believed that this bill would add additional oversight without indicating any concrete benefits. Furthermore, the Department believes this would infringe on the separation of powers by forming a legislative commission to supervise an executive branch agency. DCF suggests strengthening one of the many forms of oversight already in place instead of creating a new council. Currently, the Department receives oversight from the following entities: State Advisory Council, Regional Advisory Councils, legislative oversight from the Committee on Children, Federal Monitoring, revised Juan F. exit plan, Children’s Behavioral Plan Advisory Committee, Youth Advisory Board, independent state oversight (OCA) and non-government evaluators.

**Leonard Fasano, State Senator:**
Senator Fasano testified in support of this bill. The Senator believes establishing oversight that is truly independent and involves all relevant parties is crucial in protecting vulnerable children in Connecticut. Additionally, Senator Fasano included several examples of investigations over the past few years regarding the Department of Children and Families. He then outlined his three main areas of concern and needed improvement that were identified through investigations. These areas include appropriate and effective risk assessment, adherence to foster care licensing guidelines and appropriate use of “Voluntary Safety agreements” and referrals to the Family Assessment Response Program. In conclusion, the Senator believes the best way to address the past chronic and systemic failure of DCF is to establish the State Oversight Council.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Sandra Carbonari, Primary Care Pediatrician & Medical Director, Connecticut Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics:
The medical director submitted testimony in favor of this bill. However, having worked her entire career as a primary care physician, Sandra believes there should be a member included with expertise in children’s health as a whole. The Connecticut Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics believes the addition of a pediatrician would ensure consideration of all medical needs of infants, children and adolescents.

Susan R. Kelley, Director of Advocacy and Policy, NAMI Connecticut:
The director submitted testimony in support of this bill on behalf of both NAMI Connecticut and ACMH. Overall, the organizations believe it is important to limit Governor appointments and include more legislative appointments to the council as this bill is intended to do. Also, NAMI CT and ACMH are fond of the annual reporting requirement to the Children’s and Appropriations Committees. On the other hand, it is believed that this bill would extend the oversight scope to DCF’s behavioral health mandate as a whole, which would allow for overlaps without providing interagency support. Secondly, it seems as though the proposed council is based on the outdated framework of the State Advisory Council (SAC) that was created before existing committees and advisories concerning children’s mental health were implemented. Not including the other partners participating in existing committees and advisories would be a disservice.

Stephanie Priestman:
Testimony was submitted in support of this bill. As a mother of a non-verbal autistic daughter, Stephanie believes this bill would help her daughter receive the care she needs to live a fulfilling life.

Lauren Ruth, Ph.D., Connecticut Voices for Children:
Lauren testified in support of the concept of this bill, but provided a few language changes for consideration. First, instead of mandating that DCF provide staff and funding for the Council, it is believed the General Assembly should provide independent staff and funding. Secondly, CT Voices for Children would like the DCF Commissioner to be included as a voting member of the council. Additionally, creating a mechanism to involve commissioners from other child-serving agencies is believed to be beneficial to the child welfare council. It is believed allowing any council member to access DCF data would be disadvantageous to the council. Lastly, increasing the membership to include the Office of the Child Advocate, the Public Defenders, members that overlap with the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee
and Behavioral Health Policy and Oversight Committee, and legislators from the Committee on Children and Appropriations Committee would allow all key partners to join together to discuss an important issue.

**NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:**

See response from administration/agency.

**Reported by:** Mikhela Hull  
**Date:** 3/21/19