Committee on Children

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: SB-453
Title: AN ACT ESTABLISHING A DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OMBUDSMAN OFFICE.
Vote Date: 3/12/2019
Vote Action: Joint Favorable
PH Date: 2/14/2019

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

REASONS FOR BILL:
To construct an independent Department of Children and Families ombudsman office within the Office of Governmental Accountability.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Vannessa Dorantes, Commissioner, State of Connecticut Department of Children and Families:
Vanessa expressed her opposition to this bill. She expressed the addition of this new office would result in additional costs to the state. She mentioned that the Department already has an Ombudsman’s office, and creating an external office would still require the internal office to do the same amount of work. She also expressed that the internal office has frequent interactions with the Office of the Child Advocate. For these reasons she believes that this bill is unnecessary.

Sarah Eagan, Child Advocate, Office of the Child Advocate:
Sarah expressed her support for this bill. She mentioned that the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) works closely with the Department of Children and Families to ensure the safety of all children. The OCA serves the role of an ombudsperson function within available funding. She believes that an independent agency is critical in ensuring the safety of all children. She suggested the committee consider the following; 1) provide funding to the OCA to investigate facilities involved with the safety and wellbeing of children, 2) ensuring that legislators have access to DCF reports concerning the function of the ombuds-office, including information on the issues presented to the office, the frequency of and nature of contact, actions taken to
resolve problems brought forth, and recommendations made to the agency from outside sources.

**Senator Leonard Fasano:**
Senator Fasano submitted testimony in favor of this bill. He mentioned that the state has an interest in protecting vulnerable children. He believes that this office will make children’s voices heard and increase the chances of keeping children safe. He also mentioned that the Office of the Child Advocate has published many reports stating the wrongdoings of the Department of Children and Families. He believes that an independent office can correct these wrongdoings and keep children safe.

**NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:**

**Melissa and Carl Meyer:**
Melissa expressed support for this bill. She shared her story of not being able to adopt through DCF since most children in the system are aged out. This can make life difficult for these children because they are left without any resources once they reach the legal age to be on their own. She believes that an independent office will ensure transparency and make sure that DCF is functioning properly by keeping the best interests of the children in mind.

**Stephanie Priestman:**
Stephanie expressed her support for this bill. She shared her story of having to care for her non-verbal autistic child. She mentioned that her child was abused while in foster care, and although DCF investigated the issue they did not provide her with any help. She also expressed that DCF did not provide access to a physician who could adjust her daughter’s medication as needed. She feels as if she did not receive the help that she needed to ensure that her child was safe and healthy. For these reasons she supports this bill.

**NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:**
See response from administration/agency.

Reported by: Dea Ballij Date: 03/20/2019