

July 20, 2021

The Honorable Representative Michael J. Finn
House Chair
Joint Committee on Children, Families, and
Persons with Disabilities

The Honorable Senator Adam Gomez
Senate Chair
Joint Committee on Children, Families, and
Persons with Disabilities

Dear Chair Finn, Chair Gomez, and Committee members,

The Children's League of Massachusetts (CLM) is a statewide non-profit association of over 60 private and public organizations and individuals that collectively advocate for public policies and quality services that are in the best interest of the Commonwealth's children, youth and families. It is through public education and advocacy that CLM promotes the availability, accessibility, and quality of these needed services. Our members, who comprise providers, advocates, and regulators of services, know first-hand the struggles that children and their families face in the Commonwealth.

We are writing to testify **in support of An act to eliminate disproportionality and inequities for at-risk children** (H.228/S.139).

Inequitable treatment of children and families is a systemic issue in social services. With child well-being and healthy development at risk, the stakes could not be higher. We must actively dismantle the systems that are creating disproportionate treatment of families based on race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, disability status, and economic status throughout the child welfare system.

The legislature has worked hard with advocates over the last several years to address racial inequity and systemic racism in the areas of juvenile justice reform, criminal justice reform, and policing reform – and yet we have a long way to go. The issue of disproportionality in child welfare is not new, but we have not put the same energy into unpacking the systemic racism and implicit bias that is driving families of color into the child welfare system to begin with, nor have we taken steps to actively dismantle the disproportionate involvement of these families throughout the child welfare system.

What do we know? The Department of Children and Families (DCF) now provides data in their quarterly and annual reports on disproportionate number of families of color who are being reported to DCF, and the persistence of disproportionate treatment of these families throughout their

involvement with DCF. For example, in Quarter 3 of 2021 the number of 51A reports (initial reports) to DCF showed that:

- Hispanic/Latinx families were 3.3 times more likely to be reported to DCF than white families
- Black families were 2 times more likely
- Multi-racial families were 3.1 times more likely
- Hawaiian/Pacific Islander families were 1.8 times more likely

We also know that 27% of reports from mandated reporters did not identify race and ethnicity and are not required to collect that data.

What this information tells us is simple: families of color are being reported to DCF at much higher rates than white families. So now we must deepen the information that is available to help us understand which families, why they are being reported and by whom, and what we can do about it.

As a member of the DCF data task force, the Juvenile Justice and Data Policy Board, and the Child Trauma Task Force we can confirm that state agencies, particularly those with different Secretaries, track different data sets based on different definitions, or may not be tracking data at all. These disparate systems make it all but impossible to collect, compare, and analyze data across systems to track and understand where disparities are most prevalent.

There are some positive developments that we can build on:

- The Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) has created a Master Data Management System with improved capacity to match records across agencies for service delivery and research purposes. However, the data coming from the various agencies that specifically work with children is not available/comparable.
- The Department of Public Health (DPH) Health Equity Dashboard is a good step toward introductory level understanding of the impact of race on the health of Massachusetts residents, but requires cross-analysis to understand the impact specifically on at-risk children and families.

Despite these small steps, we need more consistent data across systems to include medical personnel, schools, courts, and law enforcement that encompasses all systems that connect with child welfare. We need consistency in data points and definitions and the ability to analyze that data

across systems to understand the scale and nature of the problem, the causes and contributors to inequity in our systems, and the corrective action that is needed.

We know that other states are finding effective solutions when the data illustrates where disproportionality problems occur:

- New York City passed a law to require all agencies under their Administration of Children and Families to complete “equity assessments” to identify policies and practices that may be implemented to address disparate outcomes among demographic groups.
- Nassau County, NY began a practice of “blind removal teams” where demographic information and the location where a family lives is removed from the decision-making team when deciding if a child needs to be removed. The number of children of color going into care went from 55.5% down to 39%. This method has been piloted in Michigan and Minnesota, and will be piloted this year in Los Angeles County.

Here in Massachusetts, the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) is the only agency in a position to gather data from the disparate agencies that interact with children and families at risk of DCF involvement and analyze these data in a way that gets to actionable steps for improved services and outcomes. Some of this work is already happening through the Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Board, the DCF Data Task Force, and the Mandated Reporter Commission. OCA could build on these efforts for example by:

- Looking deeper into the reports coming from various mandated reporter sources, analyzing disproportionality issues, and making recommendations for improving data collection needed to understand the problem and take action.
- Bring together a wider array of stakeholders and experts who work with children and families to identify corrective solutions that would contribute to dismantling disproportionality throughout child welfare involvement.
- Completing a national scan of across the country of policies and practices that have been proven effective in reducing disproportionality and addressing inequities.

Child welfare, safety, and well-being is a complex issue that crosses many public service sectors, with many opportunities for disproportionate treatment of families based on race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, disability status, and economic status. Without complete and comparable information, we cannot implement corrective action and proactive solutions. As you take on the



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broader social justice and equity agenda of this legislature, we implore you to consider the impact on the youngest citizens of the Commonwealth and vote this bill out favorably and work diligently for its passage without delay.

Sincerely,

Tammy Mello

Executive Director

Children's League of Massachusetts