



June 15, 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 establishing a foster parents' Bill of Rights** (H. 212/S.87). Foster families play a key role in the child welfare system, providing temporary safe and stable spaces that help to minimize the trauma experienced by children. Over the past 15 months, as COVID-19 spread across the country and here in Massachusetts, the critical role foster parents play as part of the essential safety net for children became clearer than ever. Foster families were faced with caring for children under extreme circumstances. They found themselves with children home 24/7, supporting virtual learning, facilitating contact with families via technology and being the sole in-person support network for some of Massachusetts most vulnerable children. They took on responsibilities far beyond what was ever expected of them and did so as a result of their commitment and passion for supporting children in need. This legislation is more critical than ever to

ensure foster families experiences are valued and they can access the training, resources and support they deserve to perform this vital job with success.

Second, foster families are first-hand witnesses of each individual child's progress, strengths, and challenges—critical information for social workers and others planning and working to achieve positive permanency outcomes. As seen in the case of David Almond, communication between DCF, courts, and others involved with care is vital to determining the best outcomes for individual children. Federal regulations require states to review foster children's cases at least once every six months to ensure they are receiving appropriate care and that a timely plan is in place to either reunify families or release a child for adoption. It is imperative that foster parents are included in sharing information at the foster care reviews. Their experience and input provide critical information that should influence ultimate determinations on placement and permanency.

Third, we are grateful that the bill includes language regarding the Reasonable Prudent Parent Standard (RPPS). The federal government passed the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthen Families Act in 2014, which requires states to implement the RPPS. This gives foster parents the authority to make day to day decisions affecting children in their care. The standard ensures that foster parents have the right to make routine decisions that enables them to create a normal home like environment for children in their homes. The standard allows foster parents to weigh factors, as all parents do, when making decisions about their children – by considering age, maturity, developmental level, potential risk factors, the appropriateness of the activity - all things that focus on the importance of emotional and developmental growth. Forty-four states have enacted state legislation on RPPS, and while the standard is referenced in the newly revised DCF Foster Care Review Policy it is not yet specified in the materials or trainings provided to foster parents. Codifying the standard will give clear guidance to foster families about how to assess situations, make decisions, and understand how their decision making will be evaluated by DCF Staff. It also ensures that children who have experienced the trauma of being removed from their families have opportunities to have



age and developmentally appropriate experiences all children have like going to a friend's house to play, having a sleepover, or date.

Finally, like all persons in the child welfare network, foster families are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect. This bill's inclusion of the right to be free from all forms of discrimination in carrying out their duties as foster parents is a critical step toward inclusiveness for those wishing to serve as foster families. This bill also helps ensure that youth in the system can be placed with families that understand and support their individual perspective and identities.

We respectfully urge the Committee to report out this bill favorably and work diligently for its passage.

Sincerely,

Tammy Mello

Executive Director

Children's League of Massachusetts