



HOUSE BILL 612: Fostering Care in NC Act.

2025-2026 General Assembly

Committee: Senate Rules and Operations of the Senate
Introduced by: Reps. Chesser, Bell, Loftis, Alston
Analysis of: Third Edition

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OVERVIEW: *House Bill 612 would make various changes to laws affecting juveniles and associated services including the following:*

- *Section 1. Amend the definition of "abused juveniles" and add definitions for "Division", "legal counsel for the department", and "post-adoption contact agreement and order".*
- *Section 2.(a) Add death of the juvenile as a terminating event for the court's jurisdiction.*
- *Sections 3.(a) Require that that the director attest that the petition alleging abuse, neglect, or dependency was reviewed by legal counsel for the department prior to filing if legal counsel does not sign the petition.*
- *Section 3.(a) Remove provision exempting a home visit where a juvenile resides when a report alleges abuse or neglect in a child care facility as defined in Article 7 of Chapter 110 of the General Statutes.*
- *Section 3.(a) Remove requirement for a director to request the court to order a mental health evaluation by licensed psychologist or psychiatrist when a child has been removed from the home due to physical abuse and the alleged abuser has a history of violent behavior against people.*
- *Section 3.(a) Establish a procedure for a reporter to request that the Division review a director's decision to not accept a report for assessment.*
- *Section 3.(a) Amend the procedure for a reporter to request the prosecutor or Division review the director's decision to not file a petition.*
- *Section 3.(b) Require that a petition alleging interference with an assessment be signed by the legal counsel for the department, and if legal counsel for the department does not sign the petition, the director must attest that the petition was reviewed by legal counsel for the department prior to filing. The director may sign the petition.*
- *Section 3.(b) Change the burden of proof to clear and convincing from clear, cogent, and convincing for petitions alleging interference with assessment.*
- *Section 3.(c) Require that legal counsel for the department draft or review petitions alleging abuse, neglect, or dependency, that the director sign and verify the petitions, and that if legal counsel for the department does not also sign the petition, the director must attest that the petition was reviewed by legal counsel for the department prior to filing.*
- *Section 3.(c) Require that the prosecutor or Division review a director's decision to not file a petition if requested pursuant to G.S. 7B-305.*

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Director



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- *Section 3.(d) Remove requirement that (i) the court rule on petition filed pursuant to 7B-302(d1) prior to returning a child to a home where the alleged abuser or abusers are or have been present and (ii) the court order an alleged abuser to submit to a complete mental health evaluation by a licensed psychologist or psychiatrist if the court finds that the alleged abuser has a history of violent behavior against people.*
- *Section 4.(a) Establish a procedure for addressing conflicts of interest when a report alleging abuse, neglect, or dependency is made.*
- *Section 4.(b) Require a substitution of parties when there is a change of venue because of a conflict of interest.*
- *Section 5. Clarify that a guardian, custodian, or caretaker may be removed as a party after adjudication if the court finds that party's continuation as a party is not necessary to meet the juvenile's need and that the removal as a party is in the best interest of the child.*
- *Section 5. Provide the court with the option to allow a current caretaker or foster parent to intervene if the individual has the authority to file a petition to terminate parental rights under G.S. 7B-1103.*
- *Sections 6.(a)-(c) Allow the district court judge to delegate authority to a magistrate to receive a petition and enter a nonsecure custody order, require each county to have a district court judge or delegated magistrate available at all times to receive petitions and enter nonsecure custody orders, and clarify that an order entered after the clerk's office is closed is effective when it is signed by a judicial official.*
- *Section 7. Allow a petition to be provided to a district court judge or delegated magistrate by any secure means.*
- *Section 8. Allow the appointment of co-guardians and create the procedure for terminating a co-guardianship if that relationship dissolves.*
- *Section 9. Clarify that the appointment of a guardian ad litem under G.S. 7B-604 to a parent under the age of 18 does not impact the minor parent's entitlement to a guardian ad litem under 7B-601 when that minor parent is also the minor child in a separate petition filed against their parents. It would also require that a minor parent have a basis for incompetency other than being a minor for a guardian ad litem under Rule 17 of the Rules of Civil Procedure to be appointed.*
- *Section 10. Require (i) the county to be represented by legal counsel for the department in all abuse, neglect, and dependency actions, (ii) the attorney to complete a minimum of six hours of training on State and federal child welfare laws prior to representing the county, and (iii) the Division in consultation with representatives of county directors and department attorneys to establish ongoing training and practice standards applicable to legal counsel for the department.*
- *Section 11.(a) Clarify that a county department does not have to recommend unsupervised visits before recommending that custody be returned but that it is whichever recommendation occurs first.*
- *Sections 11.(b) and (c) Identify placements of the juvenile the department is authorized to make as dispositional alternatives or for nonsecure custody and prohibit the department from placing*

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the juvenile in an unlicensed facility or any facility not licensed to care for juveniles without a court order authorizing such placement.

- *Section 12. Permit the Division to be heard on a motion filed by the hospital where the juvenile is located, the local management entity/managed care organization, or the prepaid health plan regarding the juvenile's continued stay in the hospital, the Department of Health and Human Services' (DHHS) standing to file that motion would be removed, and clarify the procedure for the hearing on this motion.*
- *Section 13. Clarify the definition of and procedures for review and permanency planning hearings.*
- *Section 14.(a) Prohibit the department from seeking child support and the court from ordering any type of child support when custody of the child is placed with the department.*
- *Section 14.(b) Change the burden of proof for adjudicatory hearings from clear, cogent, and convincing to clear and convincing.*
- *Section 14.(c) Clarify that in termination of parental rights actions, neglect of a child born out of wedlock includes a biological or possible biological father's failure to make efforts to acknowledge or establish his paternity of the child and failure to form or attempt to form a relationship with the child within three months of the child's birth.*
- *Section 14.(d) Include a parent whose rights have been terminated as an authorized individual to request reinstatement of his or her parental rights and clarify the procedure for reinstatement of parental rights.*
- *Section 15. Revise the requirements for when consent is required for adoption of a child.*
- *Section 16.(a) Establish procedures for mental health treatment and assessments for children in the custody of the department of social services.*
- *Section 16.(b) Require DHHS to consult with hospitals, prepaid plans, and county departments to develop and distribute uniform guidance on the roles and responsibilities of each entity involved in the delivery of case management services during a juvenile's hospital stay by April 1, 2026. This would apply to any juvenile receiving protective services regardless of who has custody.*
- *Section 17. Provide authority to the Secretary to review any child welfare cases, require the Secretary to notify the director of violations of State or federal law, and if corrections are not made, to notify the county board of commissioners and other county officials. A director's failure to comply with a directive from the Secretary would fall outside the scope of the county's agency relationship with DHHS and DHHS would not be liable for any claim arising from the director's failure to comply with any law or rule identified by the Secretary. This provision would not be a waiver, modification, or elimination of any immunity or other legal defense otherwise available to the county, director, or any other county official.*
- *Section 18. Allow post-adoption contact agreements to be entered and enforced as a court order if certain requirements are met.*
- *Sections 19.(a) and 19. (b) Establish a procedure for expungement from the responsible individuals list if certain requirements are met.*

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- *Sections 20.(a) and 20.(b) Require prosecutor and Division to conduct a review of a director's decision to not file a petition when a request for review is made to either entity and establish the procedure for that review.*
- *Sections 21.(a) and 21.(b) Remove the requirement for payment of child support to the State for foster care assistance payments when a child is in the custody of a county department of social services.*
- *Section 21.5. Establish a procedure for a biological or possible biological father to seek relief from the court if he was prevented from taking any action to prevent a termination of parental rights or finding that his consent to an adoption was not required because the mother (i) committed fraud in identifying the father or withheld the known identity of the father or (ii) concealed her pregnancy or the child's birth.*
- *Various technical and conforming changes.*

CURRENT LAW: Current law is underlined throughout the document.

BILL ANALYSIS:

Section 1. G.S. 7B-101-Definitions

The definition of "abused juvenile" would be amended to include a juvenile who is a victim of an unlawful sale, surrender, or purchase of a minor or whose parent, custodian, guardian, custodian, or caretaker commits, permits, or encourages the commission of a sexually violent act by, with, or upon the juvenile. Definitions for "legal counsel for the department", the "Division", and "post-adoption contact agreement and order" would be added.

Section 2.(a) G.S. 7B-201(a)-Retention and termination of jurisdiction

Jurisdiction over a juvenile in an abuse, neglect, or dependency action terminates (i) by court order, or (ii) when the juvenile turns 18 or is otherwise emancipated, whichever occurs first. Death of the juvenile would be added as an event terminating the court's jurisdiction.

Section 2.(b) This section would become effective when it becomes law and apply to any action pending or filed on or after that date.

Section 3.(a) G.S. 7B-302-Assessment by director; military affiliation; access to confidential information; notification of person making the report.

G.S. 7B-302(a) exempts a home visit where a juvenile resides when there is an allegation of abuse or neglect in a child care facility as defined in Article 7 of Chapter 110 of the General Statutes. This exemption would be removed.

G.S. 7B-302(c) and (d) requires the county director to sign a petition when a parent, guardian, caretaker, or custodian refuses services arranged for or provided by the director or when immediate removal is necessary for the protection of the juvenile. Signature of legal counsel for the county department would also be required and if that signature is not on the petition, the director would be required to attest that the petition was reviewed by the legal counsel for the county.

G.S. 7B-302(d1) requires that the director petition the court to order an alleged abuser to submit to a complete mental health evaluation if the review reveals that the alleged abuser has a history of violent behavior against people. This provision would be removed.

G.S. 7B-302(f) requires the director to give the person making a report written notice within five days of receiving the report as to whether the report was accepted for assessment and whether the report was

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referred to the appropriate State or local law enforcement agency. The statute does not have a procedure for a reporter to appeal the decision of a director to not accept the report for assessment. Written notice to the reporter would also be required to contain the basis for the decision not to accept the report for assessment and the procedure to follow to request a review by the Division of the director's decision. This request would have to be made within five days of receipt of the notice and the Division must review the director's decision within five days of receiving the request. The Division may affirm the decision or require that an assessment be performed. The reporter may also ask the director to review the decision of the department and that director conducting the review.

G.S. 7B-302(g) currently allows the reporter the option to request a review by the prosecutor's office of a director's decision to not file a petition. The reporter would have the option to request the prosecutor or Division to review the director's decision to not file a petition.

Section 3.(b) G.S. 7B-303-Interference with assessment.

The director may file a petition alleging that an individual has obstructed or interfered with an assessment. The director would also have the option to sign a petition alleging interference with an assessment. If legal counsel for the department does not sign the petition, the director would be required to attest that the petition was reviewed by legal counsel for the department. The standard of proof would be changed from clear, cogent, and convincing evidence to clear and convincing evidence.

Section 3.(c) G.S. 7B-403-Receipt of reports; filing of petition.

The director is authorized to draft petitions alleging abuse, neglect, or dependency. Legal counsel for the department would be required to review or draft the petitions and the director would be authorized to sign the petitions. If legal counsel for the department does not sign the petition, the director would be required to attest that legal counsel reviewed the petition.

Section 3.(d) G.S. 7B-503-Criteria for nonsecure custody.

G.S. 7B-503(b) would be repealed to conform to the amendments to G.S. 7B-302(d1) (in Section 3.(a) above).

Section 3.(e) This section would become effective April 1, 2026, and would apply to actions filed on or after that date.

Section 4.(a) G.S. 7B-302.1-Conflicts of interest and Section 4.(b) G.S. 7B-400(c) Venue.

A new procedure would be created for handling conflicts of interest that arise in abuse, neglect, and dependency matters as follows:

A conflict of interest would exist when the reported abuse, neglect, or dependency involves one of several individuals including:

- Any employee of the county department of social services.
- A relative of an employee of the child welfare division of the county department of social services.
- A relative of an employee of the county department of social services outside of the child welfare division when the director determines there is a conflict of interest.
- A foster parent supervised by the county department of social services.
- A juvenile who is the subject of a new report alleging abuse or neglect arising from events occurring while in the custody of the department.

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- A perceived conflict of interest that is identified through the professional judgment of the director of the county department of social services.

The director would be required to request another county department of social services to handle the assessment when a conflict exists and would be required to notify the Division that a conflict of interest exists and the county that will handle the assessment. If the director contacts two or more counties and the counties are unable or are unwilling to accept the assessment, the county director would be required to notify the Division, and the Division would be required to determine how the conflict will be handled. The county department with the conflict of interest would be required to provide written notification to the parent, guardian, caretaker, or custodian of the conflict, which county will assume handling the case, and the constituent concern line contact information. If there is a conflict at any point during the case and the county with the conflict does not refer the case out, the parent, guardian, custodian, or caretaker would be able to request a transfer through the constituent concern line.

Section 4.(b) would require a substitution of parties if there is a pre-adjudication change of venue due to a conflict of interest under G.S. 7B-302.1.

Section 5. G.S. 7B-401.1-Parties

G.S. 7B-401.1 would be restructured to allow the court to include foster parents or the current taker in the procedure for intervention if they would have the authority to file a petition to terminate parental rights. The court would also be allowed to remove a guardian, custodian, or caretaker as a party after adjudication, if their continuation as a party is not necessary to meet the needs of the juvenile and it is in the juvenile's best interest.

Section 6.(a) G.S. 7B-502-Authority to issue custody orders; delegation.

G.S. 7B-502 does not specifically state when the district court judge can enter a nonsecure custody order, and it allows a district court judge to delegate authority to persons other than the district court judge.

A district court judge would be authorized to enter a nonsecure custody order once a petition is filed under G.S. 7B-405 and to delegate the court's authority to a magistrate. A district court judge or delegated magistrate would be required to be available at all times in each county for the department seek nonsecure custody.

Section 6.(b) G.S. 7B-506-Hearing to determine need for continued nonsecure custody.

Conforming changes related to a delegated magistrate would be made.

Section 6.(c) G.S. 7B-404-Immediate need for petition when clerk's office is closed.

Any nonsecure custody order entered under G.S. 7B-303 and approved pursuant to G.S. 7B-502 when the clerk's office is closed would be effective and enforceable after the order is signed by a judicial official.

Section 7. G.S. 7B-508-Telephonic communication authorized.

G.S. 7B-508 allows that certain orders, notices, communications, and authorizations may be made by telephone when other methods are not practical.

The petition would be required to be provided to the judge or delegated magistrate by any secure means including hand delivery, fax, encrypted electronic delivery, or the court's electronic filing system, and the requirements for the contents of an order obtained through telephonic communication would be updated.

Section 8. G.S. 7B-600-Appointment of Guardian.

The appointment of a single guardian is allowed.

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The appointment of co-guardians would be allowed and a procedure for addressing the co-guardianship if the relationship between the co-guardians dissolves would be established.

Section 9. G.S. 7B-602-Parent's right to counsel; guardian ad litem.

7B-602(b) would be restructured to clarify that the appointment of a guardian ad litem for a minor parent under this section would not impact the minor parent's right to a guardian ad litem if he or she is also the subject of a separate juvenile petition. G.S. 7B-602(c) provides that an incompetent parent may be appointed a guardian ad litem under Rule 17 of the North Carolina Rules of Civil Procedure. This provision would be amended to clarify that a minor parent is not entitled to a Rule 17 guardian ad litem solely because they are an unemancipated minor.

Section 10.(a) G.S. 7B-604-Legal counsel for the department.

A new section would require (i) a county to be represented by legal counsel in all abuse, neglect, dependency actions, (ii) that legal counsel for the county complete a minimum of six hours of continuing education on federal and State child welfare laws prior to representing a county, and (iii) the Division to consult with county directors and legal counsel for the department to develop ongoing training and practice standards for legal counsel for the department.

Section 10.(b) Section 10.(a) of this act would become effective on April 1, 2026.

Section 11.(a) G.S. 7B-903.1- Juvenile placed in custody of a department of social services.

G.S. 7B-903.1(a) would be amended to clarify that it is not required for unsupervised visitations with the parent to occur before custody is returned to a parent but that it is whichever recommendation occurs first and that a hearing is only required to return physical custody of the juvenile to a parent, guardian, custodian, or caretaker from whose custody the child was removed.

Section 11.(b) G.S. 7B-903-Dispositional alternatives for abused, neglected, or dependent juvenile.

A county department with custody of a juvenile would be authorized to place the juvenile in any of the following:

- A licensed foster home or home otherwise authorized by law to provide such care.
- A facility operated by the department of social services.
- A facility licensed to provide care to juveniles.
- Any other home approved by the department, including the home of a relative, nonrelative kin, or other person with legal custody of a sibling of the juvenile.

The department would be prohibited from placing the juvenile in any unlicensed facility or facility not licensed to provide care for juveniles without court approval with such approval being included in an order prior to placement.

Section 11.(c) G.S. 7B-505-Placement while in nonsecure custody.

The department is authorized to place a juvenile held in nonsecure custody in (i) a licensed foster home or a home otherwise authorized by law to provide such care, (ii) a facility operated by the department of social services, or (iii) with approval by the court and designation in the order, any other home or facility.

A facility licensed to provide care to a juvenile would be added as an authorized placement for a juvenile held in nonsecure custody. The department would be prohibited from placing the juvenile in any unlicensed facility or facility not licensed to provide care for juveniles without court approval with such approval being included in an order prior to placement.

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Section 11.(d) This section would become effective when it becomes law and apply to any action pending or filed on or after that date.

Section 12.(a) G.S. 7B-903.2-Emergency motion for placement and payment.

G.S. 122C-142.2 provides a process for assessment of a juvenile in the custody of the department of social services (DSS) when the juvenile presents to a hospital emergency department for mental health treatment, and a determination of the appropriate placement and treatment for the juvenile following the hospital stay. G.S. 7B-903.2 provides a means for seeking court intervention to assess costs and other relief related to a juvenile's continued stay in an emergency room or hospital when the requirements of G.S. 122C-142.2 are not met.

The statute would be amended as follows:

- The standing of DHHS to file a motion in the matter would be removed but the Division would have the opportunity to be heard in any hearing on any motion as the supervising principal of the county DSS.
- Evidence of a hospital's failure to cooperate in a juvenile's assessment in defense of alleged violations by DSS or an LME/MCO or prepaid health plan (LME/MCO) would be authorized.
- A hearing on the motion within ten business days of service or the next scheduled juvenile court session, whichever is later, would be required.
- The court would be required to make findings as to whether the juvenile met hospital discharge criteria instead of whether there was no medical necessity for the juvenile to remain in the hospital. The date on which the court determined the juvenile met hospital discharge criteria would be used to determine the date after which payment of hospital charges and property damage would be required from the responsible party.
- Dismissal of a motion due to discharge of the juvenile from the hospital would not preclude a separate cause of action for monetary damages.

Section 12.(b) This section would become effective when it becomes law and apply to any action pending or filed on or after that date.

Section 13.(a) G.S. 7B-906.1-Review and permanency planning hearings.

G.S. 7B-906.1 provides that a review hearing is conducted when custody has not been removed from a parent, guardian, caretaker, or custodian and that a permanency planning hearing is held when custody has been removed from a parent, guardian, or custodian.

G.S. 7B-906.1 would be amended to remove caretakers and clarify that review hearings are when custody has not been removed from a parent, guardian, or custodian at initial disposition, and that permanency planning hearings are held when custody has been removed from a parent, guardian, or custodian at initial disposition. The purpose of a review hearing is to review the progress being made with court ordered services including completion of court-ordered services within 12 months of the filing of the petition, demonstration that the circumstances leading to the department's involvement have been resolved to the court's satisfaction, and that a safe home can be provided for the juvenile. To remove a child from the parent, guardian, or custodian after initial disposition or the prior review hearing, the court must find one of the following: (i) at least one factor under G.S. 7B-503(a)1 through (a)(4) or 7B-901(c) has occurred and the juvenile has experienced or is at substantial risk of experiencing physical or emotional harm as a result or (ii) the parent, guardian, or custodian consents to the removal. When the parent, guardian, or custodian successfully completes court ordered services and the child is residing in the home, the court would be required to terminate jurisdiction absent extraordinary circumstances.

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Section 13.(b) G.S. 7B-906.2-Permanent plans; concurrent planning.

Concurrent planning ends when a permanent plan is or has been achieved. Concurrent planning would also end when reunification is not identified as a permanent plan.

A procedure would be created when there is a proposed change in placement and reunification is not a plan when the following criteria are met:

- The juvenile must be in the custody of the department of social services.
- The juvenile has resided with the caretaker for the preceding 12 consecutive months, and the caretaker objects to the removal.
- The current caretaker is a relative caretaker, or a nonrelative caretaker and there are no relatives willing and able to provide proper care and supervision of the juvenile in a safe home.
- The court-ordered primary or secondary permanent plan is adoption.
- The current caretaker objects to the removal and has notified the department of their desire to adopt the juvenile.

A hearing on the motion would be required to be held within 30 days of filing the motion and notice requirements and other rules and procedures for the hearing would be established. The caretaker would be allowed to address the court, present evidence, cross-examine witnesses, and be represented by an attorney at the caretaker's expense. Participation in this hearing would not make the caretaker a party to the action.

The section would not apply in cases where there are allegations of abuse or neglect of the juvenile while under the care and supervision of the caretaker.

The requirement for the court to make findings of fact demonstrating the degree or success or failure toward reunification would be removed.

The court would be required to inform the guardian or custodian of their right to pursue child support when the permanent plan of guardianship or custody has been achieved.

Section 14.(a) G.S. 7B-904-Authority over parents of juvenile adjudicated as abused, neglected, or dependent.

G.S. 7B-904(d) requires that a parent pay a reasonable sum in child support when legal custody of the child is vested in someone other than a parent if the court finds the parent is able to do so.

The department would be prohibited from seeking child support in any type of proceeding and prohibit the court from ordering child support in any type of proceeding when the juvenile is in the custody of the department. Additionally, Section 14.(a) would clarify that subsections (d1) and (e) apply to parents, guardians, custodians, or caretakers over whom the court has personal jurisdiction rather being served with a summons.

Section 14.(b) G.S. 7B-1109-Adjudicatory hearing on termination.

The standard of proof is clear, cogent, and convincing evidence.

The standard of proof would be changed to clear and convincing evidence.

Section 14.(c) G.S. 7B-1111-Grounds for terminating parental rights.

One reason a parent's rights may be terminated is if the court finds that the parent abused or neglected the juvenile. For purposes of terminating parental rights, neglect would include a biological or possible

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biological father of a child born out of wedlock who, within three months of the child's birth, has not (i) made efforts to acknowledge or establish paternity of the child and (ii) formed or attempted to form a relationship with the child.

Section 14.(d) G.S. 7B-1114-Reinstatement of parental rights.

G.S. 7B-1114 allows only the child whose parent's rights have been terminated, the guardian ad litem attorney, or a department of social services with custody of the child to file a motion to reinstate a parent's rights.

A parent whose parental rights have been terminated would be included in the list of permissible individuals who may file a petition to reinstate parental rights but would not be entitled to court appointed counsel. A procedure would also be established for a pretrial hearing to consider the identification of the parties, whether the motion to reinstate meets the required criteria, the appointment of a guardian ad litem, discovery and related issues, and any other issue that can be addressed at a pretrial hearing. The court would be required to dismiss the motion if it determines the required criteria are not met.

Section 14.(e) Sections 14.(a) and (b) of this act would become effective when this act becomes law and would apply to any action pending or filed on or after that date. Sections 14.(c) and (d) of this act would become effective when this act becomes law and apply to any action filed on or after that date.

Section 15.(a) G.S. 48-3-601-Persons whose consent to adoption is required.

There are six scenarios where the consent of a man who may or may not be the biological father is required including:

- Any male who legitimates the child prior to filing the adoption petition or within three months of the child's birth, whichever occurs later.
- Prior to the filing of the adoption petition, within three months of the child's birth, or, if applicable, prior to the date of the prebirth determination of right to consent hearing, whichever occurs later, the man acknowledges paternity of the child and meets one of the following: (i) is obligated to support the child under a written agreement or court order; (ii) has provided or attempted to provide support in accordance with his financial means to the mother, the child, or both during and after pregnancy and regularly visited or communicated with the mother, the child, or both, during and after the pregnancy; or, (iii) before the child's placement for adoption or the mother's relinquishment, has married or attempted to marry the mother by a marriage solemnized in apparent compliance with law, although the marriage is or could be held invalid.
- Any male who receives the child into his home and openly holds the child out as his biological child prior to the adoption petition being filed or within three months of the child's birth, whichever occurs later.

Section 15.(b) This section would become effective when it becomes law.

Sections 16.(a) and (b) G.S. 122C-142.2-Presentation at a hospital for mental health treatment.

G.S. 122C-142.2 addresses the process and steps that must be taken when a juvenile in county department of social services (county DSS) custody presents to a hospital emergency department for mental health treatment. The DSS director must contact the appropriate LME/MCO or prepaid health plan (LME/MCO) to request an assessment within 24 hours of determination that the juvenile will be released, and no appropriate placement is immediately available. The LME/MCO must arrange for an assessment within 5 business days. Based on the assessment, the juvenile should be placed in the appropriate placement within 5 business days. If no appropriate placement is available, the Department of Health and Human Services Rapid Response Team (RRT) must be contacted to coordinate a response to address the immediate needs

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of the juvenile. This team includes representatives of the Division of Social Services, Division of Mental Health Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Abuse, Division of Child and Family Well-Being, and Division of Health Benefits.

Sections 16(a) and (b) would make the following changes:

- Require the hospital to contact the DSS director if the juvenile is in DSS custody, requires mental health treatment, and is present at the hospital for reasons other than involuntary commitment or a voluntary admission order.
- Require actions to ensure post-hospital placement be taken as soon as practicable.
- Require the LME/MCO to arrange an assessment to occur within three business days and business days, as used in this section, would be defined as Monday through Friday, inclusive of holidays.
- Prohibit the hospital from releasing the juvenile from the hospital unless the juvenile both meets hospital discharge criteria and either (i) the recommended placement is available or (ii) the DSS director or individual authorized to consent to treatment (consenting adult) consents to release.
- The DSS director or LME/MCO must notify the RRT if:
 - It is anticipated that no appropriate available placement or treatment provider will be available.
 - The assessment recommendations differ from the wishes of the consenting adult or readily available services.
 - There are delays in accessing needed behavioral health assessments.
 - The juvenile has been released by the hospital in violation of this section.
- If notified, the RRT must determine if action is needed to address the juvenile's needs. If so, the RRT must develop a plan with the DSS, LME/MCO, and hospital on steps needed to meet the juvenile's treatment needs, and a plan to monitor implementation.
- RRT meetings are limited to its members, the DSS, LME/MCOS, hospital, and invitees of the RRT. The meetings are not public, and the information remains confidential and are not public records.
- LME/MCOs must monthly notify the Division of Social Services of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) of information on the number of notifications of assessment, length of time to find placement, and number of recommendations at each level of care.
- By April 1, 2026, DHHS must develop and distribute uniform guidance to hospitals, county DSS, and prepaid health plans on the roles and responsibilities of each entity involved in case management during a juvenile's hospital stay.

Section 16.(c) Section 16.(a) would become effective when it becomes law and would apply to any action pending or filed on or after that date. The remainder of the section would become effective when it becomes law.

Sections 17.(a) and (b) G.S. 108A-74-Counties and regional social services departments required to enter into annual written agreement for all social services programs other than medical assistance; local department failure to comply with written agreement or applicable law; corrective action; State intervention in or control of service delivery.

This section would be entitled "Christal's Law."

A new subdivision would be added authorizing the Secretary of DHHS to access records pertaining to open or closed child welfare cases of county DSS, inquire into and review county social work practice, and inquire and review local DSS legal practice for the delivery of child welfare services for a particular case or all cases of the DSS. The Secretary could exercise this authority as part of regular monitoring or

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in response to specific complaints. If the Secretary found violations, the DSS director would be notified in writing of the violations, a directive to remedy the violations in accordance with applicable statutes or rules, and the timeframe in which the violations must be remedied. If concerns were not addressed within a timeframe specified by the Secretary, the Secretary would notify the county commissioners, county manager, and board of social services, and direct the DSS director to remedy the violation through immediate action prescribed by the Secretary. A DSS director's failure to comply would fall outside of the scope of the county DSS agency relationship with DHHS, and DHHS would not be liable for claims arising from the DSS director's failure to comply with the law.

Section 17.(c) This section would become effective when it becomes law.

Section 18.(a). G.S. 7B-909.2-Post-adoption contact agreements; orders from minors in department of social services custody.

Post-adoption contact agreements are currently unenforceable in North Carolina.

A new process would be created to allow parents of a minor adoptee in the custody of the county department of social services and the prospective adoptive parents to enter into a voluntary mediated post-adoption contact agreement prior to relinquishment of the child. The agreement would be reviewed by the court with jurisdiction over the minor within 2 days of the signing of the agreement to determine if the agreement would be incorporated into a court order. The written agreement would have to be entered into without coercion, fraud, or duress, evidenced by oath or affidavit. When approved by the court, the post-adoption contract agreement and order would constitute a custody determination and create a civil action. The record of the civil action would be withheld from public inspection and would terminate when the child turns 18 or is emancipated.

Section 18.(b) G.S. 7B-909.3-Modification, enforcement, and termination of a post-adoption contact agreement and order; no right to appeal; rights of adoptive parents.

A party to a court-approved post-adoption contact agreement and order seeking to modify, enforce, or terminate the agreement would be required to file a motion in the civil action, and mediation would be required unless waived by the court. The court could modify the terms of the agreement if the court found by a preponderance of evidence that there had been a material and substantial change in the circumstances and the modifications were in the best interest of the child. The modification could reduce but not expand the information and contact with the former parents. Frivolous actions could result in attorneys' fees to the prevailing party, and there would be no right to repeal the order.

Section 18.(c) G.S. 50-13.2B-Modification or enforcement of post-adoption contact agreement and order.

A new provision would be created in Chapter 50 of the General Statutes to clarify that custody actions between parties of a post-adoption contact agreement and order are governed by G.S. 7B-909.3.

Section 18.(d) Various conforming changes would be made to Chapter 48 related to the post-adoption contact agreement and order.

Section 19.(a) G.S. 7B-323(e)-Petition for judicial review; district court.

An identified individual may petition the court for judicial review of inclusion of his or her inclusion on the responsible individual's list at any time if the review serves the interest of justice or for extraordinary circumstances. An individual identified as a responsible individual who (i) fails to petition for judicial review in a timely manner after notification, (ii) is determined by a court to be a responsible individual after judicial review, or (iii) is criminally convicted as a result of the same incident is placed on the responsible individuals list under G.S. 7B-311. This list is provided by DHHS to child care institutions

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and agencies that provide foster care, child care, or adoption services to consider in determining fitness of individuals to adopt or care for children.

The request for judicial review under subsection (e) would be limited to requests less than one year from placement on the responsible individual's list and change the reasons to serving the interest of justice or for good cause.

Section 19.(b) G.S. 7B-325-Petition for expungement.

A new process would be created to allow a petition for expungement from the responsible individuals list if the following conditions were met:

- At least one year has passed since the person was placed on the list without judicial review.
- At least five years have passed since the person was placed on the list after judicial review.
- At least eight years have passed since the person completed their sentence and all post-release conditions if criminally convicted of the incident that placed them on the list and has had no additional felony or misdemeanor convictions.

Individuals with convictions related to child sexual abuse, human trafficking, or a child fatality are not eligible for the expungement from the responsible individuals list.

Petitions for expungement from the responsible individuals list would be maintained on a separate docket and provide a closed hearing before a judge without a jury, with the burden upon the petitioner to show by a preponderance of evidence. In determining whether to grant the petition, the court would consider the nature of abuse or serious neglect, the amount of time since placement on the list, activities that reflect changed behavior or circumstances, and any other relevant circumstances. The court may grant the petition to remove the person's name from the list if the court finds by clear and convincing evidence that there is little likelihood that the petitioner will be a future perpetrator of child abuse or neglect.

Section 20.(a) G.S. 7B-305-Request for review by the prosecutor or Division.

A person who makes a report may request the prosecutor to review a director's decision not to file a petition alleging the abuse, neglect, or dependency of a juvenile.

The person who makes a report would also be allowed to request review of the director's decision to not file a petition through the constituent concern line at the Division or to both the prosecutor and the constituent concern line.

Section 20.(b) G.S. 7B-306-Review by the prosecutor or Division.

The prosecutor is required to conduct the investigation within 20 days of receiving a request for review of the director's decision. The prosecutor may take any of the following actions: (i) affirm the director's decision, (ii) instruct law enforcement to investigate the allegations, and (iii) direct the director to file a petition.

The prosecutor and Division would be required to conduct the review requested pursuant to G.S. 7B-305 when a request for review is made to either the prosecutor or the Division or both. The agency receiving the request would have two business days from receipt of the request to notify the other agency. The agencies may conduct the review independently or jointly and may consult with each other. If either agency determines that a petition should be filed, the director shall file the petition. Additionally, the Division may also direct the director to take specific action to provide protective services.

Section 20.(c) G.S. 7B-308-Authority of medical professionals in abuse cases.

A physician, administrator, or that person's designee to request the prosecutor or the Division to review the director's decision not to file a petition.

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Section 21.(a) G.S. 50-13.10-Past due child support vested; not subject to retroactive modification; entitled to full faith and credit.

A child support payment, or any portion thereof, is not past due and no arrearage accrues (1) from and after the date of the child's death, (2) from and after the date of the supporting party's death, (3) during any period when the child is living with the supporting party pursuant to a court order or voluntary agreement between the parties, and (4) any period when the supporting party is incarcerated, is not on work release, and does not have other resources to pay child support.

Foster care assistance owed to the State by the supporting party during any period when the child is placed in the custody of a department of social services would be added to the list above.

Section 21.(b) G.S. 110-135.1-Foster care assistance payments.

A new section creating a procedure to address foster care assistance payments would be added to Chapter 110 of the General Statutes. Upon filing a motion in the cause by either party showing that the child has been placed in foster care, the following would be required:

- The obligor's child support, if owed to the State, would be suspended during any time the child is placed in the custody of a county department of social services.
- Any foster care assistance payments owed to the State for past foster care assistance payments would be reduced to zero.

This new provision would not create a debt to be owed to the obligor.

Section 21.5 G.S.48-3-611 Paternal challenge to consent not necessary or termination of parental rights.

A new procedure would be created for a biological or possible biological father to challenge (i) whether his consent was necessary or (ii) a termination of parental rights action or ruling when the mother committed fraud in identifying the father or withheld his known identity or concealed the pregnancy or birth. The biological or possible biological father would be required to take action within 30 days of discovering the fraud or concealment by requesting that the court (i) restore his parental rights, (ii) set aside the adoption, (iii) grant custody or visitation under Chapter 50 of the General Statutes, (iv) enter an injunction of any pending action to terminate his parental rights or finalize an adoption. The court would be required to that the petitioner is the biological father of the child, and the remedy requested would be in the child's best interest.

EFFECTIVE DATE: Except as otherwise provided, this act would become effective October 1, 2025, and apply to all actions pending or filed on or after that date.