

CAPITAL NEWS SERVICE

Legislative foster care fixes headed to governor

By  Sarah Atwood | September 30, 2022

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LANSING – Distant relatives could more easily adopt foster children and their lawyers would need trauma-informed training under a package of bills headed for the governor’s signature.

There are more than 10,000 children in the Michigan foster care system, according to the Kids Count Data Center.

Children aging out of foster care are some of the most disadvantaged people in the United States, said Chris Yatooma, the principal of the board of the New Foster Care, a Bloomfield Township nonprofit advocacy organization.

“By the time they’re 21, one in three are homeless,” Yatooma told the House Committee on Families, Children, and Seniors last spring. “One in four are imprisoned. One in two are unemployed. Three out of five don’t finish high school.”

The House bill just passed the Senate unanimously and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer is expected to sign it into law.

The changes came out of a bipartisan task force, headed by Rep. Mary Whiteford, R-Casco Township. The task force toured foster care facilities and spoke with children and foster parents.

“We knew that to effectively address the problems in the foster care system, we had to speak directly with the people involved,” said Rep. Laurie Pohutsky, D-Livonia.

Pohutsky sponsored a requirement that will require lawyer-guardians for foster children to undergo trauma-informed training.

“No one is in the foster care system without going through adverse situations that are often traumatic for children,” Pohutsky said. “Lawyer-guardians sometimes aren’t prepared to handle these children, and I believe that this training will improve their effectiveness in representing their clients.”

Trauma-informed training prioritizes a relationship built on trust between children and their lawyers. The court system can be difficult for children emotionally, and being supported during that process will prevent more trauma being caused from the process, according to Children’s Law Center.

“We need higher expectations for lawyer-guardians,” said Robert Dorigo Jones, the vice president of Michigan’s Children. “They need to know what trauma means for a young person and what this can do to them.”

Another bill will allow more distant relatives to take custody of a child and for non-family members to take custody of a child if they have strong emotional ties. Both of these additions aim to reduce the number of children in the foster care system.

Most states are expanding who is considered a relative for children in foster care, said Dorigo Jones. “But relatives have to want to take in the child, and we aren’t rushing to place a child with just anyone.”

“This bill package is a starting point for legislators and foster care providers to have more conversations and work towards more solutions for problems that exist within the system,” Dorigo Jones said. “I’m confident that more steps will be taken in the future.”

The bill package was sponsored by Reps. Mary Whiteford, R-Casco Township; Laurie Pohutsky, D-Livonia; Tyrone A. Carter, D-Detroit; Phil Green, R-Millington; Rodney Wakeman, R-Saginaw Township; Stephanie A. Young, D-Detroit; Sarah Anthony, D-Lansing; . Jack O’Malley, R-Lake Ann; and Daire Rendon, R-Lake City.

