

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Child and Family Services Agency



Public Hearing on
Bill 23-0095, the “Protecting Children Through Mandatory Reporting
Amendment Act of 2019”

Testimony of
Robert L. Matthews
Deputy Director for Entry Services

Before the
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
The Honorable Charles Allen, Chairperson

Council of the District of Columbia
Room 123
John A. Wilson Building,
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

July 11, 2019
10:00 a.m.

Good morning, Chairman Allen, councilmembers, and staff. I am Robert L. Matthews, Deputy Director for Entry Services for the District of Columbia's Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), which is responsible for taking reports of known or suspected child abuse and neglect of youth up to age 18 by parents, guardians, or custodians wherever they occur in the District. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Bill 23-0095, the "Protecting Children Through Mandatory Reporting Amendment Act of 2019."

Mandated reporters play a critical role in child protection in the District of Columbia. Mandated reporters have access to children through their professional capacity, and their proximity to children allows them to know or reasonably suspect when an infant, child, or teen has been abused or is in immediate danger of being abused. These professionals are obligated by law to report known or suspected incidents of child abuse and neglect. Their access to children makes them an essential part of the safety net that protects the District's children.

This bill seeks to broaden the circumstances under which mandatory reporters for suspected child abuse or neglect must contact the proper authorities by adding clergy and leaders of religious institutions to the list of mandatory reporters, increasing penalties for failure to report child abuse, and requiring training and certification for mandated reporters.

We support the intent of the bill and look forward to working with you on refinements that we believe will make the bill more effective. CFSA recommends that the Committee consider the following issues and changes:

- CFSA's mandate is to respond to reports of child abuse and neglect by a parent or legal guardian. This includes individuals under 18 years of age. However, this does not include the ability or mandate to investigate past abuse of adults as children. The bill should specify the proper entity to receive this type of report specified in the bill. Failure to make this clear within this bill would lead to confusion as to the appropriate agency to report such an allegation.
- CFSA also recommends removing the word "prostitute" which is considered an outdated term and should not be used in connection with a child. We therefore prefer the terms "sexual abuse" or "sex trafficking" be used to reference a child being sexually abused or exploited.
- In the bill, a mandated reporter, the head of the facility, and the chair of the board of directors each have an individual responsibility to report. CFSA contends that this will result in an increase of reports being made to the hotline which would require additional resources. CFSA also believes that this component of the bill will strip the identified victim of any privacy and confidentiality prior to any alleged abuse having been investigated or founded.

- CFSA agrees that there should be a mandated reporter training curriculum and has already developed and provides such training. Should this measure become law, CFSA would be prepared to make any necessary changes to the existing training, incorporating any appropriate feedback from the Office of the Attorney General. CFSA, being the subject matter expert, is the best agency to develop the training, but the agency would not necessarily be most appropriate to take on the responsibility of tracking all persons who participate in the mandated reporter training. Such an undertaking would require additional resources to account for all individuals who complete the approved curriculum. The Committee should work to further refine appropriate roles and responsibilities in this area.

The protection and safety of children is essential and at the core of CFSA's mission. Mandated reporters in many ways are the eyes and ears for the most vulnerable residents in the District of Columbia. Their importance to the community cannot be overstated - they are a vital component in carrying out CFSA's mission. We look forward to continuing our partnership with the Office of the Attorney General and the Council in further strengthening this bill. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.