

Chapter 129

(Senate Bill 267)

AN ACT concerning

Family Law – Investigation of Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect – Preliminary Report to State’s Attorney

FOR the purpose of repealing the requirement that a local department of social services or law enforcement agency provide a local State’s Attorney with a certain report of the preliminary findings of an investigation of suspected child abuse or neglect within a certain period of time; and generally relating to the investigation and reporting of suspected child abuse and neglect.

BY repealing

Article – Family Law

Section 5–706(i)

Annotated Code of Maryland

(2019 Replacement Volume and 2020 Supplement)

BY repealing and reenacting, with amendments,

Article – Family Law

Section 5–706(j) through (t)

Annotated Code of Maryland

(2019 Replacement Volume and 2020 Supplement)

SECTION 1. BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF MARYLAND,
That the Laws of Maryland read as follows:

Article – Family Law

5–706.

[(i)] Within 10 days after the local department or law enforcement agency receives the first notice of suspected abuse of a child who lives in this State that is alleged to have occurred in this State, the local department or law enforcement agency shall report to the local State’s Attorney the preliminary findings of the investigation.]

[(j)] (I) Within 5 business days after completion of the investigation of suspected abuse of a child who lives in this State that is alleged to have occurred in this State, the local department and the appropriate law enforcement agency, if that agency participated in the investigation, shall make a complete written report of its findings to the local State’s Attorney.

[(k)] (J) Promptly after receiving a report of suspected abuse or neglect of a child

who lives in this State that is alleged to have occurred outside of this State, the local department shall:

- (1) forward the report to the appropriate agency outside of this State that is authorized to receive and investigate reports of suspected abuse or neglect;
- (2) cooperate to the extent requested with the out-of-state agency investigating the report; and
- (3) if determined appropriate by the local department:
 - (i) interview the child to assess whether the child is safe; and
 - (ii) provide services to the child and the child's family.

[(l)] (K) Notwithstanding the provisions of this section, the Secretary may implement an alternative response program for selected reports of abuse or neglect.

[(m)] (L) (1) The Department shall convene a multidisciplinary alternative response advisory council.

- (2) The advisory council shall consist of the following members:
 - (i) the Secretary of Human Services, or the Secretary's designee;
 - (ii) the Secretary of Health, or the Secretary's designee;
 - (iii) the State Superintendent of Schools, or the Superintendent's designee;
 - (iv) a representative from the Maryland Disability Law Center;
 - (v) a representative from a child advocacy organization;
 - (vi) a representative from a community partner or a local service provider;
 - (vii) a pediatrician with experience in diagnosing and treating injuries related to abuse and neglect;
 - (viii) an attorney with experience representing children or adults in abuse and neglect cases;
 - (ix) a representative from the Office of the Public Defender;
 - (x) a parent or guardian who has personal experience with the child

protective services system;

(xi) a child who has personal experience with the child protective services system;

(xii) two representatives from local departments of social services; and

(xiii) two representatives from local citizens review panels.

(3) The Secretary of Human Services or the Secretary's designee shall be the chair of the advisory council.

(4) The advisory council shall advise the Department on:

(i) the development of the alternative response implementation plan, which may include a pilot program;

(ii) oversight and monitoring of the alternative response implementation plan;

(iii) consulting with local citizens review panels, local services affiliates, and other local partners for feedback and recommendations on the alternative response implementation plan;

(iv) defining the scope of the independent evaluation of the implementation of the alternative response program; and

(v) defining the scope of the ongoing evaluation of the alternative response program.

[(n)] (M) Only a low risk report of abuse or neglect may be considered for an alternative response.

[(o)] (N) A report that is not assigned for an alternative response shall be assigned for investigation in accordance with this section.

[(p)] (O) The following reports of suspected abuse or neglect may not be assigned for an alternative response:

(1) sexual abuse; and

(2) abuse or neglect:

(i) occurring in an out-of-home placement;

(ii) resulting in death or serious physical or mental injury;

(iii) if, in the previous 3 years, the individual suspected of abuse or neglect has been identified as responsible for abuse or neglect as documented in the records of the local department; or

(iv) if the individual suspected of abuse or neglect has had one report assigned for an alternative response within the past 12 months or two reports assigned for an alternative response within the past 24 months.

[(q)] (P) A report assigned for an alternative response may be reassigned at any time for an immediate investigation based on any of the following factors and circumstances:

(1) a reassessment of the report or relevant facts;

(2) a determination that the case satisfies a criterion in subsection **[(p)] (O)** of this section; or

(3) a family's inability or refusal to participate in the alternative response assessment.

[(r)] (Q) A report assigned for an investigation may be reassigned for an alternative response at any time based on:

(1) a reassessment of the report or relevant facts that demonstrate that the case meets the criteria for an alternative response;

(2) a determination that accepted services would address all issues of risk of abuse or neglect and child safety; and

(3) approval by a caseworker supervisor.

[(s)] (R) When a report is referred for an alternative response, the local department shall:

(1) see the child and the child's parent or primary caretaker within 24 hours of receiving a report of physical abuse;

(2) see the child and the child's parent or primary caretaker within 5 days of receiving a report of neglect;

(3) attempt to have an on-site interview with the child's parent or primary caretaker;

(4) evaluate the child's home environment;

(5) decide on the safety of the child, wherever the child is, and of other children in the household;

(6) decide on the safety of other children in the care or custody of the individual suspected of abuse or neglect;

(7) advise the appropriate law enforcement agency that the report has been assigned for an alternative response, if the law enforcement agency made the report of abuse or neglect;

(8) inform the individual suspected of child abuse or neglect of the allegations made against the individual in a manner consistent with laws protecting the rights of the person who made the report;

(9) complete an alternative response assessment within 60 days after the receipt of the report;

(10) within 10 days after completing the alternative response assessment, provide a written report to the family members who are participating in the alternative response assessment as to whether and what services are necessary to address:

(i) the safety of the child or other children in the household; and

(ii) the risk of subsequent abuse or neglect; and

(11) consistent with the assessment and any safety or services plans:

(i) render any appropriate services in the best interests of the child;

(ii) refer the family or child for additional services; or

(iii) as necessary for the safety of the child or other children in the household, establish a plan to monitor the safety plan and the provision or completion of appropriate services.

[(t)] (S) The local department:

(1) shall:

(i) maintain complete records related to an alternative response and services for 3 years after the report was received if there is no subsequent child welfare involvement; and

(ii) expunge complete records related to an alternative response and services if there is no subsequent child welfare involvement after 3 years;

(2) may not use or disclose records related to an alternative response for purposes of responding to a request for background information for employment or voluntary services; and

(3) shall protect from disclosure records related to an alternative response in accordance with § 1–202 of the Human Services Article.

SECTION 2. AND BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, That this Act shall take effect October 1, 2021.

Approved by the Governor, April 13, 2021.