

The Florida Senate
BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Committee on Children, Families, and Elder Affairs

BILL: SPB 7018

INTRODUCER: For consideration by the Children, Families, and Elder Affairs Committee

SUBJECT: Child Welfare

DATE: January 9, 2026

REVISED: _____

| | ANALYST | STAFF DIRECTOR | REFERENCE | ACTION |
|----|---------|----------------|-----------|--------------------|
| 1. | Rao | Tuszynski | | Pre-meeting |

I. Summary:

SB 7018 makes changes to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the child welfare system. The bill changes the definition of “visitor” to reduce the number of background checks required for visitors to promote normalcy within foster homes.

The bill makes the Step into Success Pilot Program into a permanent statewide program within the Office of Continuing Care at the DCF. The bill promotes the expansion of the program into more diverse areas and emphasizes collaboration between the DCF and local chambers of commerce. The bill strengthens the training opportunities available to program mentors and requires the DCF to provide experienced staff as program liaisons. The bill increases the stipend provided to participating former foster youth by removing the under-utilized welfare stipend offset and increasing stipend payments for *all* former foster youth participating in the Step into Success program.

The bill also requires the Florida Institute for Child Welfare (FICW) to develop and implement a program to identify and catalogue best practices that community-based care lead agencies are utilizing across the state. The bill requires the FICW to collaborate with the DCF’s Office of Quality and Office of Child and Family Well-Being.

The bill has an effective date of July 1, 2026.

II. Present Situation:

Florida’s Child Welfare System – Generally

Chapter 39, F.S., creates Florida’s dependency system charged with protecting children who have been abused, abandoned, or neglected.¹ Florida’s child welfare system identifies children and families in need of services through reports to the central abuse hotline and child protective

¹ Chapter 39, F.S.

investigations.² The Department of Children and Families (DCF) and community-based care (CBC) lead agencies³ work with those families to address the problems endangering children, if possible. If the problems cannot be addressed, the child welfare system finds safe out-of-home placements for these children.⁴

Child welfare services are directed toward the prevention of child abuse, abandonment, and neglect.⁵ The DCF aims to increase the safety of the child within his or her home, using in-home services, such as parenting coaching and counseling to maintain and strengthen the child's natural supports in the home environment.⁶ These services are coordinated by DCF-contracted CBCs. The outsourced provision of child welfare services is intended to increase local community ownership of the services provided and their design. Lead agencies contract with many subcontractors for case management and direct-care services to children and their families.⁷ There are 16 lead agencies statewide that serve the states 20 judicial circuits.⁸ Ultimately, the DCF remains responsible for the operation of the central abuse hotline and investigations of abuse, abandonment, and neglect.⁹ Additionally, the department is responsible for all program oversight and the overall performance of the child welfare system.¹⁰

Department of Children and Families

The DCF implements a practice model for child and family well-being that is safety-focused, trauma-informed, and family-centered. Such practices are intended to ensure:

- Permanency. Florida's children should enjoy long-term, secure relationships within strong families and communities.
- Child Well-Being. Florida's children should be physically and emotionally healthy and socially competent.
- Safety. Florida's children should live free from maltreatment.
- Family Well-Being. Florida's families should nurture, protect, and meet the needs of their children, and should be well integrated into their communities.¹¹

² See generally s. 39.101, F.S. (establishing the central abuse hotline and timeframes for initiating investigations).

³ See s. 409.986(1)(a), F.S. (finding that it is the intent of the Legislature that the Department of Children and Families "provide child protection and child welfare services to children through contracting with CBC lead agencies"). A "community-based care lead agency" or "lead agency" means a single entity with which the DCF has a contract for the provision of care for children in the child protection and child welfare system, in a community that is no smaller than a county and no larger than two contiguous judicial circuits. Section 409.986(3)(d), F.S. The secretary of DCF may authorize more than one eligible lead agency within a single county if doing so will result in more effective delivery of services to children. *Id.*

⁴ Chapter 39, F.S.

⁵ Section 39.001, F.S.

⁶ See generally The Department of Children and Families, *Florida's Child Welfare Practice Model*, available at: <https://www.myflfamilies.com/services/child-family/child-and-family-well-being/floridas-child-welfare-practice-model> (last visited 11/6/25).

⁷ Department of Children and Families, *About Community-Based Care (CBC)*, available at: <https://www.myflfamilies.com/services/child-and-family-well-being/community-based-care/about> (last visited 11/6/25).

⁸ Department of Children and Families, *Lead Agency Information*, available at: <https://www.myflfamilies.com/services/child-family/child-and-family-well-being/community-based-care/lead-agency-information> (last visited 11/6/25).

⁹ Section 39.101, F.S.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ See generally Department of Children and Families (DCF), *Florida's Child Welfare Practice Model*, available at: https://www.myflfamilies.com/sites/default/files/2022-12/FLCSPPracticeModel_0.pdf (last visited 11/6/25).

Office of Continuing Care

The Office of Continuing Care (Office) was created by the Legislature in 2021.¹² Established to ensure young adults aging out of the foster care system have ongoing support and care coordination, the Office serves young adults who have aged out of the foster care system between 18 and 21 years of age, or 22 years of age with a documented disability.¹³ The Office is responsible for a variety of duties including, but not limited to, the following:¹⁴

- Informing young adults aging out of the foster care system of the Office's purpose, the services the Office provides, and contact information.
- Serving as a direct contact to the young adult to provide information on how to access services such as food assistance, behavioral health services, housing, Medicaid, and educational services.
- Collaborating with CBC lead agencies to identify local resources for young adults.
- Developing and administering the Step into Success Workforce Education and Internship Pilot Program for foster youth and former foster youth.
- Identifying supportive adults for children transitioning out of foster care to live independently, in coordination with the Statewide Guardian ad litem Office.

Office of Quality

In 2020, the Legislature created the Office of Quality (Office) within the DCF.¹⁵ Intended to ensure the DCF and contracted service providers achieve high levels of performance, the duties of the Office include, but are not limited to, the following:¹⁶

- Identifying performance standards and metrics for the DCF and all contracted service providers reflected in the statutorily required strategic plan and results-oriented accountability system;
- Strengthening the DCF's data and analytic capabilities to identify systemic strengths and deficiencies;
- Recommending initiatives to correct programmatic and systemic deficiencies;
- Engaging and collaborating with contractors, stakeholders, and other relevant entities to improve quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of DCF programs and services; and
- Reporting systemic or persistent failures to meet performance standards and recommending corrective action to the DCF secretary.

The Office submits annual reports to the Legislature that assess the overall health of each circuit's child welfare system by evaluating performance for child protective investigators, CBC lead agencies, and children's legal services.¹⁷

¹² Ch. 2021-169, L.O.F.

¹³ Section 414.54, F.S.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Ch. 2020-152, L.O.F.

¹⁶ Section 402.715, F.S.

¹⁷ Florida Department of Children and Families, *2024 Annual Accountability Report on the Health of Florida's Child Welfare System*, available at: <https://www.myflfamilies.com/accountability> (last visited 1/7/26).

Office of Child and Family Well-Being

The Office of Child and Family Well-Being supports families working to stay safely together or be reunited, monitors the foster care and adoption systems, and supports young adults transitioning from foster care to independence.¹⁸

Every month, the Office of Child and Family Well-Being publishes monthly trends in the child welfare system to the Office of Child and Family Well-Being Dashboard on the department's website.¹⁹ The dashboard is composed of the following metrics:²⁰

- *Safety*. Measures the efficiency of child protective investigations and the child protective workforce.
- *Well-Being*. Measures the percentage of children in the child welfare system that have access to medical services, dental services, and the outcomes of youth aging out of the child welfare system.
- *Permanency*. Measures the success rates of permanency goals such as successful adoptions, sibling groups placed together, kinship care, and children who do not re-enter out-of-home care after moving to a permanent home.
- *Monthly Trends*. Measures the number of children in out-of-home care, the number of children receiving in-home services, and the number of alleged maltreatments and child protective investigations with verified findings.
- *Demographics*. Measures the disproportionality index for children in out-of-home care.

Dependency System Process

When child welfare necessitates that the DCF remove a child from the home to ensure his or her safety, a series of dependency court proceedings must occur to place that child in an out-of-home placement, adjudicate the child as dependent, and if necessary, terminate parental rights and free the child for adoption. This process is typically triggered by a report to the central abuse hotline and a child protective investigation that makes a safety determination as to whether the child should remain in his or her home, notwithstanding provided DCF services. Generally, the dependency process includes, but is not limited to:

- A report to the central abuse hotline.
- A child protective investigation to determine the safety of the child.
- In-home services or shelter of a child and an out-of-home placement.
- A court finding the child dependent.²¹

¹⁸ Florida Department of Children and Families, *Child and Family Well-Being Overview*, available at: <https://myflfamilies.com/services/child-family/child-and-family-well-being/office-child-and-family-well-being> (last visited 1/7/26).

¹⁹ Florida Department of Children and Families, *Office of Child and Family Well-Being Dashboard*, available at: <https://www.myflfamilies.com/ocfw-dashboard> (last visited 1/7/26).

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ A “child who is found to be dependent” refers to a child who is found by the court: to have been abandoned, abused, or neglected by the child’s parents or legal custodians; to have been surrendered to the DCF or licensed child-placing agency for the purpose of adoption; to have parents or legal custodians that failed to substantially comply with the requirements of a case plan for the purpose of reunification; to have been voluntarily placed with a licensed child-placing agency for the purposes of subsequent adoption; to have no parent or legal custodians capable of providing supervision and care; to be at substantial risk of imminent abuse, abandonment, or neglect; or to have been sexually exploited and to have no parent, legal custodian, or responsible adult relative available to provide the necessary and appropriate supervision. Section 39.01(15), F.S.

- Case planning to address the problems that resulted in the child’s dependency.
- Reunification with the child’s parent or other appropriate permanency option, such as adoption.²²

Central Abuse Hotline and Investigations

The department is statutorily required to operate and maintain a central abuse hotline to receive reports of known or suspected instances of child abuse,²³ abandonment,²⁴ or neglect,²⁵ or instances when a child does not have a parent, legal custodian, or adult relative available to provide supervision and care.²⁶ The hotline must operate 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and accept reports through a single statewide toll-free telephone number or through electronic reporting.²⁷

If the hotline counselor determines a report meets the definition of abuse, abandonment, or neglect, the report is accepted for a protective investigation.²⁸ Based on the report, the department makes a determination regarding when to initiate a protective investigation:

- An investigation must be immediately initiated if:
 - It appears the child’s immediate safety or well-being is endangered;
 - The family may flee or the child will be unavailable for purposes of conducting a child protective investigation; or
 - The facts otherwise warrant; or
- An investigation must be initiated within 24 hours in all other cases of child abuse, abandonment, or neglect.²⁹

Once a child protective investigator (CPI) is assigned, the CPI assesses the safety and perceived needs of the child and family; whether in-home services are needed to stabilize the family; and whether the safety of the child necessitates removal and the provision of out-of-home services.³⁰

²² Office of the State Courts Administrator, The Office of Family Courts, *A Caregiver’s Guide to Dependency Court*, available at: <https://flcourts-media.flcourts.gov/content/download/218185/file/Web-Caregivers-Guide-Final-09.pdf> (last visited 1/7/26); see also ch. 39, F.S.

²³ Section 39.01(2), F.S. defines “abuse” as any willful or threatened act that results in any physical, mental, or sexual abuse, injury, or harm that causes or is likely to cause the child’s physical, mental, or emotional health to be significantly impaired.

²⁴ Section 39.01(1), F.S. defines “abandoned” or “abandonment” as a situation in which the parent or legal custodian of a child of, in the absence of a parent or legal custodian, the caregiver, while being able, has made no significant contribution to the child’s care and maintenance or has made no significant contribution to the child’s care and maintenance or has failed to establish or maintain a substantial and positive relationship with the child, or both. “Establish or maintain a substantial and positive relationship” means, in part, frequent and regular contact with the child, and the exercise of parental rights and responsibilities.

²⁵ Section 39.01(53), F.S. states “neglect” occurs when a child is deprived of, or is allowed to be deprived of, necessary food, clothing, shelter, or medical treatment or a child is permitted to live in an environment when such deprivation or environment causes the child’s physical, mental, or emotional health to be significantly impaired or to be in danger of being significantly impaired, except when such circumstances are caused primarily by financial inability unless services have been offered and rejected by such person.

²⁶ Section 39.201(1), F.S.

²⁷ Section 39.101(1), F.S.

²⁸ Section 39.201(4)(a), F.S.

²⁹ Section 39.101(2), F.S.

³⁰ See generally s. 39.301, F.S. and Part IV, Chapter 39, F.S. (regulating taking children into custody and shelter hearings).

In-Home Services

The DCF is required to make all efforts to keep children with their families and provide interventions that allow children to remain safely in their own homes.³¹ CPIs and CBC case managers refer families for in-home services to allow children to remain in their own homes.

As of October 31, 2025, there were 7,947 children and young adults receiving in-home services.³²

Out-of-Home Care

When a CPI determines that in-home services are not enough to ensure a child's safety, the CPI removes the child from the home and places him or her in a safe and appropriate temporary out-of-home placement.³³ These placements are aimed to be the least restrictive, most family-like placements available, and are intended to provide short-term housing and support to a child until the child can safely return home, or the child achieves an alternate form of permanency, such as adoption, if reunification is not attainable.³⁴ The DCF is required to consider a child's placement in the following priority order:

- Non-offending parent.
- Relative caregiver.
- Adoptive parent of the child's sibling.
- Fictive kin who has a close existing relationship to the child.
- Nonrelative caregiver that does not have an existing relationship to the child.
- Licensed foster care.
- Group or congregate care.³⁵

³¹ Sections 39.402(7), 39.521(1)(f), and 39.701(d), F.S.

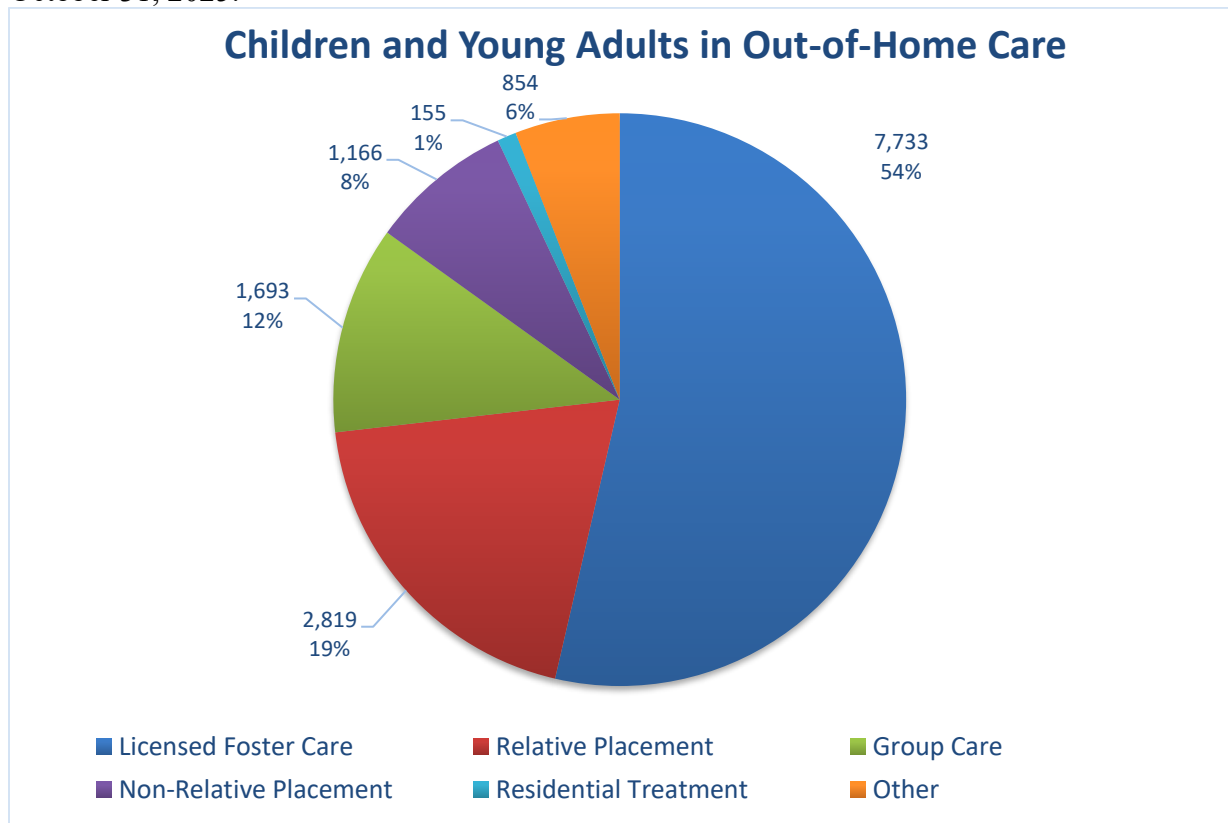
³² Florida Department of Children and Families, *Office of Child and Family Well-Being Dashboard*, available at: <https://www.myflfamilies.com/ocfw-dashboard> (last visited 11/10/25).

³³ Section 39.4021, F.S.

³⁴ Florida Department of Children and Families, *Florida's Child Welfare Practice Model*, available at: <https://www.myflfamilies.com/services/child-family/child-and-family-well-being/floridas-child-welfare-practice-model> (last visited 11/10/25).

³⁵ Section 39.4021, F.S.

The following chart demonstrates the number of children in out-of-home placement types as of October 31, 2025.³⁶



Criminal History Check Requirements for Visitors

To preserve the safety of children in out-of-home placements, individuals 18 years of age and older that visit an out-of-home placement are subject to state, national, and local criminal history records checks. Such criminal history record checks may include, but are not limited to, submission of fingerprints to the Department of Law Enforcement for forwarding to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and local criminal records checks.³⁷

Florida law defines a “visitor” as a person who:

- Provides care or supervision to a child in the home; or
- Is 12 years of age or older, other than a child in care, and who will be in the child’s home at least:
 - Five consecutive days; or
 - Seven days or more in 1 month.³⁸

The limited timeframe an individual may visit the home before being required to conduct a background check may lead to excessive burden on foster families and intrude on a foster

³⁶ Florida Department of Children and Families, *Office of Child and Family Well-Being Dashboard*, available at: <https://www.myflfamilies.com/ocfw-dashboard> (last visited 11/10/25).

³⁷ Section 39.0138 (1), F.S.

³⁸ Section 39.01(91), F.S.

family's ability to exercise reasonable judgment as to who is allowed in the foster home. Additionally, if a visitor fails to submit fingerprints within 15 calendar days after the name-based criminal history check is conducted, the DCF must seek a court order to immediately remove the child from the home, leading to placement disruption that may be harmful to the child's permanency goals.³⁹

Background Screenings

Chapter 435, F.S. establishes uniform procedures for background screenings for employees, volunteers, and contractors in Florida.⁴⁰ Individuals may be required to have a Level 1 or Level 2 background screening, depending on the job or volunteer opportunity that requires the screening. Generally, background screenings identify an individual's criminal record at the local, state, and national level, and determine if an individual is a registered sexual predator or sexual offender.⁴¹

Step Into Success

The Legislature created the Step into Success Workforce Education and Internship Pilot Program within the department's Office of Continuing Care in 2023.⁴² The program is intended to help eligible foster youth and former foster youth as they develop professional skills and prepare for an independent and successful future.⁴³

To date, there have been three cohorts of the Step into Success Pilot Program, with over 30 eligible former foster youth beginning internships in the Tallahassee and Orlando areas.⁴⁴ The DCF engages with former foster youth to ascertain career fields they may be interested in. Subsequently, the DCF pairs the foster youth with a mentor that works in that career field, providing the foster youth with the opportunity to experience the career field they are interested in first-hand.

Eligibility for the Step into Success Program

The Step into Success Pilot Program determines eligibility for the program by involvement in the foster care system. Each level of licensed foster care varies in service levels based on the foster child's needs for the out-of-home placement. The following chart displays the levels of licensed care.⁴⁵

³⁹ Section 39.0138(5), F.S.

⁴⁰ See Chapter 435, F.S.

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² Ch. 2023-255, L.O.F.

⁴³ Florida Department of Children and Families, *Step into Success Pilot Program*, available at: <https://www.myflfamilies.com/youth-young-adults> (last visited 11/10/25).

⁴⁴ December 3, 2025 E-mail from Chancer Teel, Legislative Affairs Director, the DCF (on file with the Senate Committee on Children, Families, and Elder Affairs).

⁴⁵ See generally Florida Department of Children and Families, *Foster Home Licensing*, available at: <https://www.myflfamilies.com/services/licensing/foster-care-licensing> (last visited 11/10/25).

| Licensed Care Placements | |
|---|---|
| Placement Type | Description |
| Level I: Child-Specific Foster Home | Places a child with relatives or non-relatives who have an existing relationship with the child and are willing and able to provide care for the child. |
| Level II: Non-Child Specific Foster Home | Places a child with a foster parent without having a prior relationship between the child and foster parent. |
| Level III: Safe Foster Home for Victims of Human Trafficking | Places a victim of human trafficking in a safe and stable environment. |
| Level IV: Therapeutic Foster Home | Places a child with a foster parent that has received specialized training to care for children and adolescents that have significant emotional, behavioral, or social needs. |
| Group Homes | Places a child in a single family or multi-family community with no greater than 14 children to meet the physical, emotional, and social needs of the child. |

Current foster youth who are older than 16 years of age but younger than 18 years of age that are currently in licensed care, excluding Level I licensed placements, are eligible for the Step into Success program.⁴⁶

Former foster youth who are 18 years of age but younger than 26 years of age that are currently or were placed in licensed care, excluding Level I licensed placements, for at least 60 days, are eligible for the program.⁴⁷

Independent Living Professionalism and Workforce Education Component

During the workforce education component of the Step into Success program, the Office of Continuing Care may provide participants with resources such as workshops, mock interviews, experiential training, and assistance with securing an internship or employment.⁴⁸ Such materials must include education on topics that include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Interview skills;
- Professionalism;
- Teamwork;
- Leadership;
- Problem solving; and
- Conflict resolution in the workplace.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Section 409.1455(3)(c), F.S.

⁴⁷ Section 409.1455(3)(b), F.S.

⁴⁸ Section 409.1455(5), F.S.

⁴⁹ *Id.*

Onsite Workforce Training Internship Component

Upon completion of the workforce education component of the program, eligible former foster youth may begin the workforce training internship. Participating individuals are paired with a mentor that has worked for the participating organization for at least one year and has completed a minimum of one hour of trauma-informed training to gain critical skills for successfully engaging former foster youth.⁵⁰ In the current cohorts, 100% of mentors reported they would mentor with the program again. Feedback suggested an increase in training requirements to better equip mentors with trauma-informed strategies for engaging with former foster youth.⁵¹

Additionally, mentors lead monthly performance reviews of the intern, to review his or her work product, professionalism, time management, communication style, and stress-management strategies. Mentors are eligible to receive a maximum payment of \$1,200 per intern per fiscal year, issued as a \$100 monthly payment for every month of service as a mentor. Employees may mentor three interns at one time, and may not receive more than \$3,600 in compensation per fiscal year.⁵²

Participating foster youth are required to intern for 80 hours per month to be eligible to receive the monthly stipend payment of \$1,517.⁵³ This stipend is not considered earned income for the purposes of computing eligibility for federal or state benefits; however, if an individual's benefits are reduced or lost due to receipt of such stipend, the individual may receive an offset by an additional stipend equal to the value of the maximum benefit amount for a single person allowed under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (\$298 monthly per a one-person household).⁵⁴ Interns may participate in the internship for no more than one year and receive 12 monthly stipends. A former foster youth may intern with multiple participating organizations, but not at the same time.⁵⁵

Step into Success Program Successes

While a very new program, the Step into Success cohorts have shown positive employment outcomes for former foster youth that participated in the internship component. Through the program, participants have improved their professionalism, communication skills, time management strategies, and workplace adaptability – skills that employers repeatedly identify as essential for success.

In cohort 1, the participants were able to land internships with various organizations in fields such as music business, real estate, nursing, public health, culinary arts, graphic design, and law.

⁵⁰ Section 409.1455 (7), F.S.

⁵¹ December 3, 2025 E-mail from Chancer Teel, Legislative Affairs Director, the DCF (on file with the Senate Committee on Children, Families, and Elder Affairs).

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ Section 409.1455(10), F.S. and Florida Department of Children and Families, *Step into Success Pilot Program*, available at: <https://www.myflfamilies.com/youth-young-adults> (last visited 11/10/25).

⁵⁴ Section 409.1455(10)(d), F.S.; USDA Food and Nutrition Service, *SNAP Eligibility*, available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility> (last visited 1/7/26).

⁵⁵ Section 409.1455, F.S.

Some of the early reported wins are as follows:⁵⁶

- 73% of participants in Cohort 1 completed more than 11 months in the internship.
- 53% of participants in Cohort 1 were offered employment at the completion of their internship, with a majority of those with the organization in which they interned.
- 100% of Cohort 1 mentors report they would recommend being a mentor to a co-worker or colleague, 67% of these mentors were mentoring a youth with child welfare lived experience for the first time.
- Participants have reported increased confidence and experience in the workplace.

The DCF has reported that Cohort 2 and 3 in Tallahassee and Orlando have a combined 22 participants that started and completed the workforce education and professionalism component of the Step into Success program, with 15 starting an internship, 3 pending placement, and 1 finding full-time employment outside of the program.⁵⁷ These participants have stated that the workforce education training component helped them learn and understand various workforce skills, commenting the following about the training:⁵⁸

- “Useful feedback about how my skills might not be suited for this specific job, but the interviewer shared how my skills would be a great fit for another position and helped guide me towards that application.”
- “There are resources and people willing to help.”
- “Confidence. Belief in myself and knowledge about how to take it to that next step.”
- “This is amazing – a lot of people can get a lot of things out of this training.”
- “I’ve learned more in 3 days than I did in school the whole time.”
- “I can’t wait to start working.”

Florida Institute for Child Welfare

In 2014, the Legislature established the Florida Institute for Child Welfare (FICW) within the Florida State University College of Social Work.⁵⁹ Created as a policy analysis and research mechanism, FICW collaborates with partners to enhance the sustainability of the child welfare workforce.⁶⁰ The FICW provides research and evaluation to the Legislature, technical assistance and training to child welfare agencies, and publishes an annual report with recommendations to improve the state’s child welfare system.⁶¹

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

Section 1 of the bill amends the definition of “visitor” in s. 39.01, F.S. The bill excludes contracted service providers regularly in the home that are currently screened pursuant to ch. 435, F.S. and extends the number of days an individual over the age of 12 years must be in a home before being considered a “visitor” that needs a background screening. Specifically, the bill:

⁵⁶ December 3, 2025 E-mail from Chancer Teel, Legislative Affairs Director, the DCF (on file with the Senate Committee on Children, Families, and Elder Affairs).

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ Ch. 2014-224, L.O.F.

⁶⁰ Florida Institute for Child Welfare, *About Us*, available at: <https://ficw.fsu.edu/About> (last visited 1/7/26).

⁶¹ Florida Institute for Child Welfare, *About Us*, available at: <https://ficw.fsu.edu/About> (last visited 1/7/26).

- Increases the number of consecutive days an individual must be in the home from five days to ten consecutive days; and
- Increases the number of non-consecutive days in one month from seven days to fourteen non-consecutive days or more in one month.

Section 2 of the bill amends s. 409.1455, F.S. to make the Step into Success Pilot Program into a permanent statewide program within the Office of Continuing Care at the DCF.

The bill requires the development of future cohorts of the Step into Success program within the DCF's regions and requires the office to collaborate with local chambers of commerce to recruit mentors and organizations, emphasizing the following counties:

- Duval.
- Escambia.
- Hillsborough.
- Palm Beach.
- Polk.

Further, the bill allows the office to connect eligible former foster youth with existing third-party mentorship organizations who have an interest in such organizations' programs.

The bill requires that trauma-informed training for mentors must include interactive or experiential components, such as role-playing, scenario discussion, or case studies. Mentors are required to complete a 1-hour training before being matched with a former foster youth; the training must cover core topics that include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Understanding trauma and its impacts.
- Recognizing and responding to trauma-related behaviors.
- De-escalation strategies and crisis response.
- Boundaries and mentor self-care.
- Communication skills.

The department may offer subsequent 1-hour trainings annually. Additionally, the bill allows the DCF to provide four additional optional, asynchronous, and online 1-hour trainings for mentors. The bill requires the office to inform participating organizations of such optional training opportunities.

The bill allows employees who have worked in his or her career field or area, rather than a participating organization, for at least 1 year to be eligible to serve as a mentor, which allows employees who have recently moved jobs but are subject matter experts to serve as mentors.

The bill removes the stipend offset that allows participants to recover a reduction in benefits due to receipt of the Step into Success stipend. Instead, the bill increases the stipend for all participants, changing the stipend from \$1,517 to \$1,717 across the board.

The bill requires the office to assign experienced DCF staff to serve as program liaisons that are available to support mentors during the internship period.

Section 3 of the bill amends s. 1004.615, F.S. to require the Florida Institute for Child Welfare (FICW) to establish a program to identify, describe, and catalogue best practices within the community-based care model throughout the state. Such best practices may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Management practices;
- Administrative structure;
- Internal and external communication;
- Quality assurance;
- Contract management;
- Program development and creation; and
- Child and family outcome monitoring.

The bill requires the FICW to collaborate with the DCF Office of Quality and Office of Child and Family Well-Being.

Section 4 of the bill provides an effective date of July 1, 2026.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None identified.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

The Department of Children and Families reports that they will be able to expand the Step into Success Program statewide with 12-15 intern cohorts in each region for approximately **\$2,300,000, recurring**.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Statutes Affected:

This bill substantially amends the following sections of the Florida Statutes: 39.01, 409.1455, 1004.615

IX. Additional Information:

A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Changes:

(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

None.

B. Amendments:

None.