




Governor Murphy Signs Bill Establishing New Jersey Siblings' Bill of Rights

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Bill Supplements the Child Placement Bill of Rights, Will Focus on the Importance of Maintaining Sibling Relationships in the Child Welfare System

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TRENTON – In an effort to maintain sibling relationships in the child welfare system, Governor Phil Murphy today signed S1034/A1357, establishing the Siblings' Bill of Rights in New Jersey. The bill, which will take effect immediately, will supplement the Child Placement Bill of Rights, adding a number of provisions to strengthen sibling bonds in the child welfare system and during placement. The bill aims to ensure children involved with the Division of Child Protection & Permanency in the Department of Children and Families (DCF) who wish to maintain relationships with their siblings are supported by the department in doing so. The bill recognizes that children placed outside their home have several rights related to maintaining sibling relationships, including the right to remain actively involved in the lives of their siblings, and, where appropriate, to have their voice heard in the permanency planning process for their siblings.

In January 2020, the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) Office of Family Voice (OFV) convened a Youth Council consisting of 24 members ages 14-23 who are or were previously involved with one of DCF's programs (such as Child Protection & Permanency or the Children's System of Care). During those convenings, the Youth Council worked collaboratively with DCF and its leadership to identify issues and priorities based on the lived experience of child-welfare-involved youth. These youth consistently stressed that sibling relationships were crucial for maintaining stability and ensuring future success. The Youth Council ultimately developed recommendations that were shared with the Governor and the Legislature, and highlighted in a video presentation (https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://t.e2ma.net/click/fdl3ti/7ys5259b/7ullr1__!J30X0ZrnC1oQtbaILKwZhs3BSq53J18EjH9CXMrjVp7LIG5nL26zauO4QT414dGpmZlYj9qfus5faue3msb_3Dn9YxVAKrwc) from the Council to legislators.

"One of this Administration's goals has been to make sure the children and families in this state's welfare systems are treated with compassion and empathy," said **Governor Murphy**. "I was deeply moved, as I'm sure my counterparts in the Legislature were, by the compelling recommendations of the Youth Council who shared their lived experiences of their time during the child welfare process. In what could very well be the most difficult time of their young lives, it is our hope that this bill will allow siblings in the child welfare system to maintain some measure of stability and continuity."

"From start to finish, the drive for a Sibling Bill of Rights in New Jersey was a youth-led movement, with members of the DCF Youth Council sharing their ideas, developing legislative language, securing sponsorship, successfully advocating for the bill and moving it to the finish line," said **NJ DCF Commissioner Christine Norbut Beyer**. "This bill represents the power of shared leadership and the importance of having individuals with lived experiences in a meaningful role at the table. I am so very, very proud of our Youth Council members who worked tirelessly to move this initiative forward, and who continue to help us adapt and transform our practices and policies within the Department to better serve their peers involved with the child welfare system in New Jersey."

In addition to cementing the right for children placed outside their home to participate in permanency planning decisions of other siblings and to invite siblings to participate in their own permanency planning decisions, when appropriate, the bill also adds the following rights for children placed outside their homes:

- To have access to phone calls and virtual visits between face-to-face visits with their sibling;
- To be placed in the closest proximity possible to other siblings who are not in out-of-home placement or if placement together is not possible, when it is in the best interests of the child;
- To have the recommendations and wishes of the child and of each sibling who participates in the permanency planning decision documented in the DCF case record and provided to the court;
- To know, or be made aware by DCF, of expectations for continued contact with the child's siblings after an adoption or transfer of custody, subject to the approval of the adoptive parents or caregiver;
- To be promptly informed about changes in sibling placements or permanency planning goals;
- To be actively involved in the lives of the child's siblings, e.g., birthdays, holidays, and other milestones;
- To not be denied sibling visits as a result of behavioral consequences when residing in a resource family home or congregate care setting; and
- To be provided updated contact information for all siblings at least annually, including a current telephone number, address, and email address, unless not in the best interests of one or more siblings.

The first prime sponsors for this bill are Senator Joseph Vitale and Assemblywoman Gabriela Mosquera. Other prime sponsors include Senate Majority Leader Teresa Ruiz, Assemblywoman Carol Murphy, and Assemblywoman Lisa Swain.

"Keeping children who have transitioned to an out-of-home placement as close to their siblings as possible has been shown to make for better outcomes and reduce separation-induced trauma and anxiety they may be experiencing," said **Senator Joseph Vitale, Chair of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee**. "This legislation will reinforce the importance of sibling proximity and provide young people with the sense of kinship and connection they will need as they grow physically and emotionally."

"Family separation is a very traumatic experience for children," said **Senate Majority Leader Ruiz**. "Keeping siblings together when their worlds are shifting so dramatically is critical to providing both comfort and emotional support as they grapple with the challenges of their new circumstances."

"By establishing the New Jersey Siblings' Bill of Rights, we are acting in the best interest of children involved in the state's child welfare system," said **Assemblywomen Gabriela Mosquera, Carol Murphy, and Lisa Swain in a joint statement**. "Ensuring children can maintain relationships with their siblings, arguably the people who best understand what they are going through, we can provide them with more stability and the possibility of invaluable, life-long family connections."

"The Sibling Bill of Rights is founded on a simple idea – that sibling relationships are important, and that the child welfare system should do everything within its power to preserve those relationships," said **Tawanna Brown, a member of the DCF Youth Council who worked on the legislation**. "By including protections for sibling relationships in New Jersey law, we're sending a clear message that this Administration values these bonds and that they recognize their importance to the emotional safety and well-being of children in care."

"Sibling relationships are often lifetime relationships, and are important to give youth – and adults – a sense of stability, or connection to someone who's shared a big part of your history," said **Jack Auzinger, another member of the DCF Youth Council who helped to develop the bill**. "New Jersey has taken a stance on sibling rights – that they matter, they exist, and this is now the law."

"The Siblings' Bill of Rights legislation was initiated by youth involved in the child welfare system," said **Mary Coogan, President & CEO of ACNJ**. "ACNJ applauds the Murphy Administration and the Legislature for listening to and empowering our youth in this process."

"We applaud Governor Murphy and the State Legislature for taking action on this commonsense legislation, and are proud of the youth voices that helped to craft it," said **Angie Waters, Executive Director of CASA of NJ**. "This bill truly considers the best interest of children and their siblings who are in child welfare programs and will bolster our work to support families and advocate for children and youth involved with the court and child welfare systems, giving them the opportunity to thrive."

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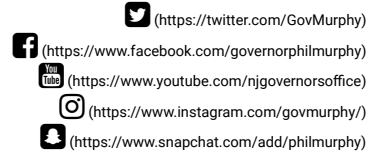
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