

**GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF NORTH CAROLINA
SESSION 2013**

**HOUSE BILL 68
RATIFIED BILL**

**AN ACT TO ESTABLISH A FOSTER CARE OMBUDSMAN PILOT PROGRAM IN
GASTON COUNTY.**

The General Assembly of North Carolina enacts:

SECTION 1.(a) There is created a foster care ombudsman pilot program.

SECTION 1.(b) The Board of County Commissioners (Board) shall establish qualifications for the selection of the foster care ombudsman, including the criteria that the person selected shall have experience in child welfare and State laws and policies governing children in foster care and shall remain objective and impartial when performing his or her duties. The Board shall appoint a person to serve as the foster care ombudsman for a period of time established by the Board. The ombudsman shall serve at the discretion and under the direction and supervision of the Board.

SECTION 1.(c) The foster care ombudsman shall:

- (1) When a juvenile is placed in foster care following a disposition order under G.S. 7B-905, be a party in all actions under G.S. 7B-906 and G.S. 7B-907 on behalf of the foster parents and permitted to speak on their behalf. The County shall designate an attorney to assist the ombudsman, if requested by the ombudsman.
- (2) Determine the facts, the needs of the juvenile, and the available resources within the family, foster community, and community to meet those needs; to facilitate, when appropriate, the settlement of disputed issues; to explore options with the court at the dispositional hearing; to report to the court when the needs of the juvenile are not being met; and to protect and promote the best interests of the juvenile as seen by the foster family.
- (3) Have the authority to obtain any information or reports, whether or not confidential, that may in the ombudsman's opinion be relevant to the case. No privilege other than the attorney-client privilege may be invoked to prevent the ombudsman from obtaining such information. The confidentiality of the information or reports shall be respected by the ombudsman, and no disclosure of any information or reports shall be made to anyone except by order of the court or unless otherwise provided by law.
- (4) Refer to the social services director and any appropriate law enforcement any cause of suspect that any juvenile is abused, neglected, or dependent, as defined by G.S. 7B-101.
- (5) Be a resource and advocate for foster parents.
- (6) Provide to the director of social services a periodic report on foster placements within the county, including any recommendations regarding that placement or future placements.
- (7) Compile and make available to the Board any data the ombudsman has collected in the course of exercising his or her official duties.
- (8) Provide information regarding the role, duties, and functions of foster parents and the ombudsman, and the rights of children in foster care.
- (9) Comply with any other duties or responsibilities deemed appropriate by the Board.

SECTION 2. G.S. 7B-906(c) reads as rewritten:

"(c) At every review hearing, the court shall consider information from the parent, the juvenile, the guardian, any foster parent, relative, or preadoptive parent providing care for the



child, the custodian or agency with custody, the guardian ad litem, the foster care ombudsman, and any other person or agency which will aid in its review. The court may consider any evidence, including hearsay evidence as defined in G.S. 8C-1, Rule 801, that the court finds to be relevant, reliable, and necessary to determine the needs of the juvenile and the most appropriate disposition.

In each case the court shall consider the following criteria and make written findings regarding those that are relevant:

- (1) Services which have been offered to reunite the family, or whether efforts to reunite the family clearly would be futile or inconsistent with the juvenile's safety and need for a safe, permanent home within a reasonable period of time.
- (2) Where the juvenile's return home is unlikely, the efforts which have been made to evaluate or plan for other methods of care.
- (3) Goals of the foster care placement and the appropriateness of the foster care plan.
- (4) A new foster care plan, if continuation of care is sought, that addresses the role the current foster parent will play in the planning for the juvenile.
- (5) Reports on the placements the juvenile has had and any services offered to the juvenile and the parent, guardian, custodian, or caretaker.
- (6) An appropriate visitation plan.
- (7) If the juvenile is 16 or 17 years of age, a report on an independent living assessment of the juvenile and, if appropriate, an independent living plan developed for the juvenile.
- (8) When and if termination of parental rights should be considered.
- (9) Any other criteria the court deems necessary."

SECTION 3. G.S. 7B-907 reads as rewritten:

"§ 7B-907. Permanency planning hearing.

(a) In any case where custody is removed from a parent, guardian, custodian, or caretaker, the judge shall conduct a review hearing designated as a permanency planning hearing within 12 months after the date of the initial order removing custody, and the hearing may be combined, if appropriate, with a review hearing required by G.S. 7B-906. The purpose of the permanency planning hearing shall be to develop a plan to achieve a safe, permanent home for the juvenile within a reasonable period of time. Subsequent permanency planning hearings shall be held at least every six months thereafter, or earlier as set by the court, to review the progress made in finalizing the permanent plan for the juvenile, or if necessary, to make a new permanent plan for the juvenile. The Director of Social Services shall make a timely request to the clerk to calendar each permanency planning hearing at a session of court scheduled for the hearing of juvenile matters. The clerk shall give 15 days' notice of the hearing and its purpose to the parent, the juvenile if 12 years of age or more, the guardian, the foster parent, relative, or preadoptive parent providing care for the child, the custodian or agency with custody, the guardian ad litem, the foster care ombudsman, and any other person or agency the court may specify, indicating the court's impending review. The department of social services shall either provide to the clerk the name and address of the foster parent, relative, or preadoptive parent providing care for the child for notice under this subsection or file written documentation with the clerk that the child's current care provider was sent notice of hearing. Nothing in this provision shall be construed to make the foster parent, relative, or preadoptive parent a party to the proceeding solely based on receiving notice and the right to be heard.

(b) At any permanency planning review, the court shall consider information from the parent, the juvenile, the guardian, any foster parent, relative or preadoptive parent providing care for the child, the custodian or agency with custody, the guardian ad litem, the foster care ombudsman, and any other person or agency which will aid it in the court's review. The court may consider any evidence, including hearsay evidence as defined in G.S. 8C-1, Rule 801, that the court finds to be relevant, reliable, and necessary to determine the needs of the juvenile and the most appropriate disposition. At the conclusion of the hearing, if the juvenile is not returned home, the court shall consider the following criteria and make written findings regarding those that are relevant:

- (1) Whether it is possible for the juvenile to be returned home immediately or within the next six months, and if not, why it is not in the juvenile's best interests to return home;

- (2) Where the juvenile's return home is unlikely within six months, whether legal guardianship or custody with a relative or some other suitable person should be established, and if so, the rights and responsibilities which should remain with the parents;
- (3) Where the juvenile's return home is unlikely within six months, whether adoption should be pursued and if so, any barriers to the juvenile's adoption;
- (4) Where the juvenile's return home is unlikely within six months, whether the juvenile should remain in the current placement or be placed in another permanent living arrangement and why;
- (5) Whether the county department of social services has since the initial permanency plan hearing made reasonable efforts to implement the permanent plan for the juvenile;
- (6) Any other criteria the court deems necessary.

(c) At the conclusion of the hearing, the judge shall make specific findings as to the best plan of care to achieve a safe, permanent home for the juvenile within a reasonable period of time. The judge may appoint a guardian of the person for the juvenile pursuant to G.S. 7B-600 or make any disposition authorized by G.S. 7B-903 including the authority to place the child in the custody of either parent or any relative found by the court to be suitable and found by the court to be in the best interest of the juvenile. If the juvenile is not returned home, the court shall enter an order consistent with its findings that directs the department of social services to make reasonable efforts to place the juvenile in a timely manner in accordance with the permanent plan, to complete whatever steps are necessary to finalize the permanent placement of the juvenile, and to document such steps in the juvenile's case plan. Any order shall be reduced to writing, signed, and entered no later than 30 days following the completion of the hearing. If the order is not entered within 30 days following completion of the hearing, the clerk of court for juvenile matters shall schedule a subsequent hearing at the first session of court scheduled for the hearing of juvenile matters following the 30-day period to determine and explain the reason for the delay and to obtain any needed clarification as to the contents of the order. The order shall be entered within 10 days of the subsequent hearing required by this subsection.

If at any time custody is restored to a parent, or findings are made in accordance with G.S. 7B-906(b), the court shall be relieved of the duty to conduct periodic judicial reviews of the placement.

If the court continues the juvenile's placement in the custody or placement responsibility of a county department of social services, the provisions of G.S. 7B-507 shall apply to any order entered under this section.

(d) In the case of a juvenile who is in the custody or placement responsibility of a county department of social services, and has been in placement outside the home for 12 of the most recent 22 months; or a court of competent jurisdiction has determined that the parent has abandoned the child; or has committed murder or voluntary manslaughter of another child of the parent; or has aided, abetted, attempted, conspired, or solicited to commit murder or voluntary manslaughter of the child or another child of the parent, the director of the department of social services shall initiate a proceeding to terminate the parental rights of the parent unless the court finds:

- (1) The permanent plan for the juvenile is guardianship or custody with a relative or some other suitable person;
- (2) The court makes specific findings why the filing of a petition for termination of parental rights is not in the best interests of the child; or
- (3) The department of social services has not provided the juvenile's family with such services as the department deems necessary, when reasonable efforts are still required to enable the juvenile's return to a safe home.

(e) If a proceeding to terminate the parental rights of the juvenile's parents is necessary in order to perfect the permanent plan for the juvenile, the director of the department of social services shall file a petition to terminate parental rights within 60 calendar days from the date of the permanency planning hearing unless the court makes written findings why the petition cannot be filed within 60 days. If the court makes findings to the contrary, the court shall specify the time frame in which any needed petition to terminate parental rights shall be filed.

(f) If the court determines that the juvenile shall be placed in the custody of an individual other than the parents or appoints an individual guardian of the person pursuant to

G.S. 7B-600, the court shall verify that the person receiving custody or being appointed as guardian of the juvenile understands the legal significance of the placement or appointment and will have adequate resources to care appropriately for the juvenile."

SECTION 4. This act applies to Gaston County only.

SECTION 5. This act is effective when it becomes law and expires July 1, 2015.

In the General Assembly read three times and ratified this the 13th day of June, 2013.

s/ Daniel J. Forest
President of the Senate

s/ Thom Tillis
Speaker of the House of Representatives