

WEST VIRGINIA LEGISLATURE

2024 REGULAR SESSION

Introduced

Senate Bill 721

By Senator Maynard

[Introduced February 8, 2024; referred
to the Committee on the Judiciary]

1 A BILL to amend and reenact §49-4-604 of the Code of West Virginia, 1931, as amended, relating
 2 to final hearings on disposition of neglected and abused children; requiring that final orders
 3 be prepared and signed within 10 days of the disposition hearing.

Be it enacted by the Legislature of West Virginia:

ARTICLE 4. COURT ACTIONS.

§49-4-604. Disposition of neglected or abused children; case plans; dispositions; factors to be considered; reunification; orders; alternative dispositions.

1 (a) *Child and family case plans.* — Following a determination pursuant to §49-4-602 of this
 2 code wherein the court finds a child to be abused or neglected, the department shall file with the
 3 court a copy of the child’s case plan, including the permanency plan for the child. The term "case
 4 plan" means a written document that includes, where applicable, the requirements of the family
 5 case plan as provided in §49-4-408 of this code and that also includes, at a minimum, the
 6 following:

7 (1) A description of the type of home or institution in which the child is to be placed,
 8 including a discussion of the appropriateness of the placement and how the agency which is
 9 responsible for the child plans to assure that the child receives proper care and that services are
 10 provided to the parents, child, and foster or kinship parents in order to improve the conditions that
 11 made the child unsafe in the care of his or her parent(s), including any reasonable
 12 accommodations in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, 42 U. S. C.
 13 §12101 *et seq.*, to parents with disabilities in order to allow them meaningful access to
 14 reunification and family preservation services;

15 (2) A plan to facilitate the return of the child to his or her own home or the concurrent
 16 permanent placement of the child; and address the needs of the child while in kinship or foster
 17 care, including a discussion of the appropriateness of the services that have been provided to the
 18 child.

19 The term "permanency plan" refers to that part of the case plan which is designed to

20 achieve a permanent home for the child in the least restrictive setting available. The plan must
21 document efforts to ensure that the child is returned home within approximate time lines for
22 reunification as set out in the plan. Reasonable efforts to place a child for adoption or with a legal
23 guardian should be made at the same time, or concurrent with, reasonable efforts to prevent
24 removal or to make it possible for a child to return to the care of his or her parent(s) safely. If
25 reunification is not the permanency plan for the child, the plan must state why reunification is not
26 appropriate and detail the alternative, concurrent permanent placement plans for the child to
27 include approximate time lines for when the placement is expected to become a permanent
28 placement. This case plan shall serve as the family case plan for parents of abused or neglected
29 children. Copies of the child's case plan shall be sent to the child's attorney and parent, guardian
30 or custodian or their counsel at least five days prior to the dispositional hearing. The court shall
31 forthwith proceed to disposition giving both the petitioner and respondents an opportunity to be
32 heard.

33 (b) *Requirements for a Guardian ad litem.* —

34 A guardian ad litem appointed pursuant to §49-4-601(f)(1) of this code, shall, in the
35 performance of his or her duties, adhere to the requirements of the Rules of Procedure for Child
36 Abuse and Neglect Proceedings and the Rules of Professional Conduct and such other rules as
37 the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals may promulgate, and any appendices thereto, and
38 must meet all educational requirements for the guardian ad litem. A guardian ad litem may not be
39 paid for his or her services without meeting the certification and educational requirements of the
40 court. The West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals is requested to provide guidance to the judges
41 of the circuit courts regarding supervision of said guardians ad litem. The West Virginia Supreme
42 Court of Appeals is requested to review the Rules of Procedure for Child Abuse and Neglect
43 Proceedings and the Rules of Professional Conduct specific to guardians ad litem.

44 (c) *Disposition decisions.* — The court shall give precedence to dispositions in the
45 following sequence:

- 46 (1) Dismiss the petition;
- 47 (2) Refer the child, the abusing parent, the battered parent or other family members to a
48 community agency for needed assistance and dismiss the petition;
- 49 (3) Return the child to his or her own home under supervision of the department;
- 50 (4) Order terms of supervision calculated to assist the child and any abusing parent or
51 battered parent or parents or custodian which prescribe the manner of supervision and care of the
52 child and which are within the ability of any parent or parents or custodian to perform;
- 53 (5) Upon a finding that the abusing parent or battered parent or parents are presently
54 unwilling or unable to provide adequately for the child's needs, commit the child temporarily to the
55 care, custody, and control of the department, a licensed private child welfare agency, or a suitable
56 person who may be appointed guardian by the court. The court order shall state:
 - 57 (A) That continuation in the home is contrary to the best interests of the child and why;
 - 58 (B) Whether or not the department has made reasonable efforts, with the child's health and
59 safety being the paramount concern, to preserve the family, or some portion thereof, and to
60 prevent or eliminate the need for removing the child from the child's home and to make it possible
61 for the child to safely return home;
 - 62 (C) Whether the department has made reasonable accommodations in accordance with
63 the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, 42 U. S. C. § 12101 *et seq.*, to parents with disabilities
64 in order to allow them meaningful access to reunification and family preservation services;
 - 65 (D) What efforts were made or that the emergency situation made those efforts
66 unreasonable or impossible; and
 - 67 (E) The specific circumstances of the situation which made those efforts unreasonable if
68 services were not offered by the department. The court order shall also determine under what
69 circumstances the child's commitment to the department are to continue. Considerations pertinent
70 to the determination include whether the child should:
 - 71 (i) Be considered for legal guardianship;

72 (ii) Be considered for permanent placement with a fit and willing relative; or
73 (iii) Be placed in another planned permanent living arrangement, but only in cases where
74 the child has attained 16 years of age and the department has documented to the circuit court a
75 compelling reason for determining that it would not be in the best interests of the child to follow one
76 of the options set forth in subparagraphs (i) or (ii) of this paragraph. The court may order services
77 to meet the special needs of the child. Whenever the court transfers custody of a youth to the
78 department, an appropriate order of financial support by the parents or guardians shall be entered
79 in accordance with §49-4-801 through §49-4-803 of this code;

80 (6) Upon a finding that there is no reasonable likelihood that the conditions of neglect or
81 abuse can be substantially corrected in the near future and, when necessary for the welfare of the
82 child, terminate the parental, custodial and guardianship rights and responsibilities of the abusing
83 parent and commit the child to the permanent sole custody of the nonabusing parent, if there be
84 one, or, if not, to either the permanent guardianship of the department or a licensed child welfare
85 agency. The court may award sole custody of the child to a nonabusing battered parent. If the court
86 shall so find, then in fixing its dispositional order the court shall consider the following factors:

87 (A) The child's need for continuity of care and caretakers;

88 (B) The amount of time required for the child to be integrated into a stable and permanent
89 home environment; and

90 (C) Other factors as the court considers necessary and proper. Notwithstanding any other
91 provision of this article, the court shall give consideration to the wishes of a child 14 years of age or
92 older or otherwise of an age of discretion as determined by the court regarding the permanent
93 termination of parental rights. No adoption of a child shall take place until all proceedings for
94 termination of parental rights under this article and appeals thereof are final. In determining
95 whether or not parental rights should be terminated, the court shall consider the efforts made by
96 the department to provide remedial and reunification services to the parent. The court order shall
97 state:

98 (i) That continuation in the home is not in the best interest of the child and why;

99 (ii) Why reunification is not in the best interests of the child;

100 (iii) Whether or not the department made reasonable efforts, with the child's health and
101 safety being the paramount concern, to preserve the family, or some portion thereof, and to
102 prevent the placement or to eliminate the need for removing the child from the child's home and to
103 make it possible for the child to safely return home, or that the emergency situation made those
104 efforts unreasonable or impossible; and

105 (iv) Whether or not the department made reasonable efforts to preserve and reunify the
106 family, or some portion thereof, including a description of what efforts were made or that those
107 efforts were unreasonable due to specific circumstances.

108 (7) For purposes of the court's consideration of the disposition custody of a child pursuant
109 to this subsection, the department is not required to make reasonable efforts to preserve the family
110 if the court determines:

111 (A) The parent has subjected the child, another child of the parent or any other child
112 residing in the same household or under the temporary or permanent custody of the parent to
113 aggravated circumstances which include, but are not limited to, abandonment, torture, chronic
114 abuse, and sexual abuse;

115 (B) The parent has:

116 (i) Committed murder of the child's other parent, guardian or custodian, another child of the
117 parent, or any other child residing in the same household or under the temporary or permanent
118 custody of the parent;

119 (ii) Committed voluntary manslaughter of the child's other parent, guardian, or custodian,
120 another child of the parent, or any other child residing in the same household or under the
121 temporary or permanent custody of the parent;

122 (iii) Attempted or conspired to commit murder or voluntary manslaughter, or been an
123 accessory before or after the fact to either crime;

124 (iv) Committed a malicious assault that results in serious bodily injury to the child, the
125 child's other parent, guardian, or custodian, to another child of the parent, or any other child
126 residing in the same household or under the temporary or permanent custody of the parent;

127 (v) Attempted or conspired to commit malicious assault, as outlined in subparagraph (iv),
128 or been an accessory before or after the fact to the same;

129 (vi) Committed sexual assault or sexual abuse of the child, the child's other parent,
130 guardian, or custodian, another child of the parent, or any other child residing in the same
131 household or under the temporary or permanent custody of the parent; or

132 (vii) Attempted or conspired to commit sexual assault or sexual abuse, as outlined in
133 subparagraph (vi), or been an accessory before or after the fact to the same.

134 (C) The parental rights of the parent to another child have been terminated involuntarily;

135 (D) A parent has been required by state or federal law to register with a sex offender
136 registry, and the court has determined in consideration of the nature and circumstances
137 surrounding the prior charges against that parent, that the child's interests would not be promoted
138 by a preservation of the family.

139 (d) As used in this section, "No reasonable likelihood that conditions of neglect or abuse
140 can be substantially corrected" means that, based upon the evidence before the court, the abusing
141 adult or adults have demonstrated an inadequate capacity to solve the problems of abuse or
142 neglect on their own or with help. Those conditions exist in the following circumstances, which are
143 not exclusive:

144 (1) The abusing parent or parents have habitually abused or are addicted to alcohol,
145 controlled substances or drugs, to the extent that proper parenting skills have been seriously
146 impaired and the person or persons have not responded to or followed through the recommended
147 and appropriate treatment which could have improved the capacity for adequate parental
148 functioning;

149 (2) The abusing parent or parents have willfully refused or are presently unwilling to

150 cooperate in the development of a reasonable family case plan designed to lead to the child's
151 return to their care, custody and control;

152 (3) The abusing parent or parents have not responded to or followed through with a
153 reasonable family case plan or other rehabilitative efforts of social, medical, mental health, or other
154 rehabilitative agencies designed to reduce or prevent the abuse or neglect of the child, as
155 evidenced by the continuation or insubstantial diminution of conditions which threatened the
156 health, welfare, or life of the child;

157 (4) The abusing parent or parents have abandoned the child;

158 (5) The abusing parent or parents have repeatedly or seriously injured the child physically
159 or emotionally, or have sexually abused or sexually exploited the child, and the degree of family
160 stress and the potential for further abuse and neglect are so great as to preclude the use of
161 resources to mitigate or resolve family problems, or assist the abusing parent or parents in fulfilling
162 their responsibilities to the child; and

163 (6) The battered parent's parenting skills have been seriously impaired and the person has
164 willfully refused or is presently unwilling or unable to cooperate in the development of a reasonable
165 treatment plan, or has not adequately responded to or followed through with the recommended
166 and appropriate treatment plan.

167 (e) At the conclusion of the disposition hearing, the court shall make findings of fact and
168 conclusions of law, in writing or on the record, as to the appropriate disposition in accordance with
169 provisions of this section. The court shall enter a disposition order, including findings of fact and
170 conclusions of law within ten (10) days of the conclusion of the hearing.

171 ~~(e)~~ (f) The court may, as an alternative disposition, allow the parents or custodians an
172 improvement period not to exceed six months. During this period the court shall require the parent
173 to rectify the conditions upon which the determination was based. The court may order the child to
174 be placed with the parents, or any person found to be a fit and proper person, for the temporary
175 care of the child during the period. At the end of the period, the court shall hold a hearing to

176 determine whether the conditions have been adequately improved and at the conclusion of the
177 hearing shall make a further dispositional order in accordance with this section.

178 ~~(f)~~ (g) The court may not terminate the parental rights of a parent on the sole basis that the
179 parent is participating in a medication-assisted treatment program, as regulated in §16-5Y-1 *et*
180 *seq.*, for substance use disorder, as long as the parent is successfully fulfilling his or her treatment
181 obligations in the medication-assisted treatment program.

NOTE: The purpose of this bill is to provide that final orders upon a disposition hearing in child abuse and neglect proceedings be prepared and signed within 10 (ten) days of the disposition hearing.

Strike-throughs indicate language that would be stricken from a heading or the present law and underscoring indicates new language that would be added.