

1 H.644

2 An act relating to access to records by individuals who were in foster care

3 It is hereby enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont:

4 Sec. 1. 33 V.S.A. § 4921 is amended to read:

5 § 4921. DEPARTMENT'S RECORDS OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT

6 (a) Record maintenance and disclosure generally. The Commissioner shall
7 maintain all records of all investigations, assessments, reviews, and responses
8 initiated under this subchapter. The Department may use and disclose
9 information from such records in the usual course of its business, including to
10 assess future risk to children, to provide appropriate services to the child or
11 members of the child's family, or for other legal purposes.

12 (b) Duty to inform parents or guardians. The Commissioner shall promptly
13 inform the parents, if known, or guardian of the child that a report has been
14 accepted as a valid allegation pursuant to subsection 4915(b) of this title and
15 the Department's response to the report. The Department shall inform the
16 parent or guardian of ~~his or her~~ the parent's or guardian's ability to request
17 records pursuant to subsection (c) of this section. This section shall not apply
18 if the parent or guardian is the subject of the investigation.

19 (c) Disclosure of redacted investigation files. Upon request, the redacted
20 investigation file shall be disclosed to:

1 (1) the child's parents, foster parent, or guardian, absent good cause
2 shown by the Department, provided that the child's parent, foster parent, or
3 guardian is not the subject of the investigation;

4 (2) the person alleged to have abused or neglected the child, as provided
5 for in subsection 4916a(d) of this title; and

6 (3) the attorney representing the child in a child custody proceeding in
7 the Family Division of the Superior Court.

8 (d) Disclosure of records created by the Department. Upon request,
9 Department records created under this subchapter shall be disclosed to:

10 (1) the court, parties to the juvenile proceeding, and the child's guardian
11 ad litem if there is a pending juvenile proceeding or if the child is in the
12 custody of the Commissioner;

13 (2) the Commissioner or person designated by the Commissioner to
14 receive such records;

15 (3) persons assigned by the Commissioner to conduct investigations;

16 (4) law enforcement officers engaged in a joint investigation with the
17 Department, an Assistant Attorney General, or a State's Attorney;

18 (5) other State agencies conducting related inquiries or proceedings; and

19 (6) the Office of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate for the purpose
20 of carrying out the provisions in chapter 32 of this title.

1 (e)(1) Disclosure of relevant Department records or information. Upon
2 request, relevant Department records or information created under this
3 subchapter shall be disclosed to:

4 (A) a person, agency, or organization, including a multidisciplinary
5 team empaneled under section 4917 of this title, authorized to diagnose, care
6 for, treat, or supervise a child or family who is the subject of a report or record
7 created under this subchapter, or who is responsible for the child's health or
8 welfare;

9 (B) health and mental health care providers working directly with the
10 child or family who is the subject of the report or record;

11 (C) educators working directly with the child or family who is the
12 subject of the report or record;

13 (D) licensed or approved foster caregivers for the child;

14 (E) mandated reporters as defined by section 4913 of this subchapter,
15 making a report in accordance with the provisions of section 4914 of this
16 subchapter and engaging in an ongoing working relationship with the child or
17 family who is the subject of the report;

18 (F) a Family Division of the Superior Court involved in any
19 proceeding in which:

20 (i) custody of a child or parent-child contact is at issue pursuant to
21 15 V.S.A. chapter 11, subchapter 3A;

1 (ii) a parent of a child challenges a presumption of parentage
2 under 15C V.S.A. § 402(b)(3); or

3 (iii) a parent of a child contests an allegation that he or she
4 fostered or supported a bonded and dependent relationship between the child
5 and a person seeking to be adjudicated a de facto parent under 15C V.S.A.
6 § 501(a)(2);

7 (G) a Probate Division of the Superior Court involved in
8 guardianship proceedings; and

9 (H) other governmental entities for purposes of child protection.

10 (2) Determinations of relevancy shall be made by the Department.

11 (3) In providing records or information under this subsection, the
12 Department may withhold:

13 (A) information that could compromise the safety of the reporter or
14 the child or family who is the subject of the report; or

15 (B) specific details that could cause the child to experience
16 significant mental or emotional stress.

17 (4) In providing records or information under this section, the
18 Department may also provide other records related to its child protection
19 activities for the child.

20 (5) Any persons or agencies authorized to receive confidential
21 information under this section may share such information with other persons

1 or agencies authorized to receive confidential information under this section
2 for the purposes of providing services and benefits to the children and families
3 those persons or agencies mutually serve.

4 (f) Disclosure to prevent harm. Upon request, relevant Department
5 information created under this subchapter may be disclosed to a parent with a
6 reasonable concern that an individual who is residing at least part time with the
7 parent requestor's child presents a risk of abuse or neglect to the requestor's
8 child. As it is used in this subsection, "relevant Department information" shall
9 mean information regarding the individual that the Department determines
10 could avert the risk of harm presented by the individual to the requestor's
11 child. If the Department denies the request for information, the requestor may
12 petition the Family Division of the Superior Court, which may, after weighing
13 the privacy concerns of the individuals involved with the parent's right to
14 protect his or her child, order the release of the information.

15 (g) Disclosure to adults that were subject to foster care placement.

16 (1) It is the intent of the General Assembly that it be the policy of the
17 State that:

18 (A) adults who were subject to placement in State foster care,
19 institutions, and other systemic placements have a statutory right to access
20 their own records in order to more fully understand their own personal stories,
21 including their health, education, family, and other histories; access healing in

1 their chosen way; and be recognized and trusted as legitimate custodians of
2 their own information;

3 (B) the Department make good faith efforts to disclose such records
4 in the broadest form permitted under applicable federal or State law in order to
5 assist with the administration of Vermont's state plan for foster care and
6 establishing eligibility for programs or services; and

7 (C) any disclosures made by the Department that are prohibited by
8 applicable federal or State law be construed as good faith efforts of the
9 Department to comply with the State's policy and statutory scheme.

10 (2) Upon request, Department records created under this subchapter shall
11 be disclosed, at no cost, to an individual who meets the following criteria, to
12 the extent permitted by federal or State law:

13 (A) the individual is the subject of the records requested;

14 (B) the individual is 18 years of age or older; and

15 (C) as a minor, the individual was in foster care or subject to any
16 juvenile judicial proceeding under this title.

17 (3) In providing records or information pursuant to this subsection, the
18 Department may withhold or redact the following:

19 (A) identifying information about any person, other than the subject,
20 in which there is a substantial likelihood that a person's safety would be
21 compromised if disclosed;

1 (B) information that creates a substantial likelihood that would
2 compromise an active law enforcement investigation; or
3 (C) reports or investigatory records about the subject of the record
4 request in which there is a formal allegation that the subject committed an act
5 of abuse or neglect.

6 ~~(g)~~(h) Penalty. Any records or information disclosed under this section and
7 information relating to the contents of those records or reports shall not be
8 disseminated by the receiving persons or agencies to any persons or agencies,
9 other than to those persons or agencies authorized to receive information
10 pursuant to this section. A person who intentionally violates the
11 confidentiality provisions of this section shall be fined not more than
12 \$2,000.00.

13 Sec. 2. 33 V.S.A. § 5117 is amended to read:

14 § 5117. RECORDS OF JUVENILE JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS

15 (a) Except as otherwise provided, court and law enforcement reports and
16 files concerning a person subject to the jurisdiction of the court shall be
17 maintained separate from the records and files of other persons. Unless a
18 charge of delinquency is transferred for criminal prosecution under chapter 52
19 of this title or the court otherwise orders in the interests of the child, such
20 records and files shall not be open to public inspection nor their contents
21 disclosed to the public by any person. However, upon a finding that a child is

1 a delinquent child by reason of commission of a delinquent act that would have
2 been a felony if committed by an adult, the court, upon request of the victim,
3 shall make the child's name available to the victim of the delinquent act. If the
4 victim is incompetent or deceased, the child's name shall be released, upon
5 request, to the victim's guardian or next of kin.

6 (b)(1) Notwithstanding ~~the foregoing~~ subsection (a) of this section,
7 inspection of ~~such the~~ records and files by or dissemination of ~~such the~~ records
8 and files to the following is not prohibited:

9 (A) a court having the child before it in any juvenile judicial
10 proceeding;

11 (B) the officers of public institutions or agencies to whom the child is
12 committed as a delinquent child;

13 (C) a court in which a person is convicted of a criminal offense for
14 the purpose of imposing sentence upon or supervising the person, or by
15 officials of penal institutions and other penal facilities to which the person is
16 committed, or by a parole board in considering the person's parole or discharge
17 or in exercising supervision over the person;

18 (D) the parties to the proceeding, court personnel, the State's
19 Attorney or other prosecutor authorized to prosecute criminal or juvenile cases
20 under State law, the child's guardian ad litem, the attorneys for the parties,

1 probation officers, and law enforcement officers who are actively participating
2 in criminal or juvenile proceedings involving the child;

3 (E) the child who is the subject of the proceeding, the child's parents,
4 guardian, and custodian may inspect ~~such~~ the records and files upon approval
5 of ~~the Family~~ a Superior Court judge;

6 (F) any other person who has a need to know may be designated by
7 order of the Family Division of the Superior Court;

8 (G) the Commissioner of Corrections if the information would be
9 helpful in preparing a presentence report, in determining placement, or in
10 developing a treatment plan for a person convicted of a sex offense that
11 requires registration pursuant to 13 V.S.A. chapter 167, subchapter 3;

12 (H) the Human Services Board and the Commissioner's Registry
13 Review Unit in processes required under chapter 49 of this title;

14 (I) the Department for Children and Families;

15 (J) the Office of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate for the
16 purpose of carrying out the provisions in chapter 32 of this title;

17 (K) a service provider named in a disposition order adopted by the
18 court, or retained by or contracted with a party to fulfill the objectives of the
19 disposition order, including referrals for treatment and placement;

1 (L) a court diversion program or youth-appropriate community-based
2 provider to whom the child is referred by the State's Attorney or the court, if
3 the child accepts the referral; ~~and~~

4 (M) other State agencies, treatment programs, service providers, or
5 those providing direct support to the youth, for the purpose of providing
6 supervision or treatment to the youth; and

7 (N) an individual who:

8 (i) is the subject of the records sought by the request;

9 (ii) is 18 years of age or older; and

10 (iii) as a minor, was subject to any juvenile judicial proceeding
11 under this title.

12 (2) Files inspected under this subsection shall be marked: UNLAWFUL
13 DISSEMINATION OF THIS INFORMATION IS A CRIME PUNISHABLE
14 BY A FINE UP TO \$2,000.00.

15 * * *

16 Sec. 3. DEPARTMENT FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES; DISCLOSURE
17 CATEGORIES; RECORDKEEPING; REPORT

18 On or before November 15, 2025, the Department for Children and
19 Families, in consultation with the Office of the Child, Youth, and Family
20 Advocate and the Vermont State Archives and Records Administration, shall
21 provide a written report to the Senate Committee on Government Operations

1 and the House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs on
2 its progress implementing 33 V.S.A. § 4921(g). The report shall include:

3 (1) the number of requests for records pursuant to 33 V.S.A. § 4921(g);

4 (2) the approximate or average amount of staff time required to comply
5 with the requests;

6 (3) systemic issues or barriers facing the Department, if any, in fulfilling
7 the requests;

8 (4) suggestions for increasing the types of records that are available to
9 youth who have had involvement with the Department; and

10 (5) any other information the Department deems pertinent for the
11 General Assembly to consider as the State moves toward broader access of
12 Department records to the youth whose lives are affected by Department
13 involvement.

14 Sec. 4. EFFECTIVE DATE

15 This act shall take effect on passage.