

Department of Legislative Services  
Maryland General Assembly  
2026 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE  
First Reader

Senate Bill 484

(Senator McKay)

Judicial Proceedings

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Family Law - Child Abuse and Neglect - Reporting

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This bill requires the Department of Human Services (DHS) to maintain a centralized intake system for reports of child abuse and neglect. On receipt of a report of child abuse or neglect, DHS must (1) record the report in its centralized intake system; (2) assess the report for validity; and (3) assign the report to the appropriate local department for investigation. The bill makes numerous related (and/or conforming) changes in regard to this centralized intake system, including by requiring an individual making a report of suspected child abuse or neglect to direct the report to DHS directly, rather than to local departments of social services or local law enforcement agencies, as applicable.

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Fiscal Summary

**State Effect:** General fund expenditures for DHS increase significantly (likely by several million dollars on an annual basis) beginning in FY 2027 to implement a centralized intake system, as discussed below. *Potential* decrease in federal fund revenues, as discussed below.

**Local Effect:** The bill is not anticipated to materially affect local government finances, although operations for local law enforcement agencies and State's Attorneys' offices are affected.

**Small Business Effect:** None.

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Analysis

**Current Law:** Statute specifies notification requirements and associated timeframes for certain individuals who have reason to believe that a child has been subjected to abuse or

neglect. Generally, reports must be made to the local department of social services or local law enforcement agencies.

Notwithstanding any other provision of law, including any law on privileges communications, each health practitioner, police officer, educator, or human services worker, acting in a professional capacity in the State who has reason to believe that a child has been subjected to abuse or neglect must notify the local department of social services or the appropriate law enforcement agency. Statute specifies certain timeframes reports must be made within.

After receiving a report of suspected abuse or neglect of a child who lives in Maryland that is alleged to have occurred in the State, the local department of social services and/or the appropriate law enforcement agency must promptly and thoroughly investigate the report to protect the health, safety, and welfare of the child or children. Within 24 hours after receiving a report of suspected physical or sexual child abuse, and within five days after receiving a report of suspected child neglect or mental injury, the local department or law enforcement agency must (1) see the child; (2) attempt to have an onsite interview with the child's caretaker; (3) decide on the safety of the child and of other children in the household; and (4) decide on the safety of the other children in the care or custody of the alleged abuser. The determinations and assessments that are required during an abuse or neglect investigation are specified in statute.

To the extent possible, a child abuse or neglect investigation must be completed within 10 days after receiving the notice of the suspected abuse or neglect. An investigation that is not completed within 30 days must be completed within 60 days of receipt of the first notice of the suspected abuse or neglect.

Reports of child abuse and neglect may also be referred for an alternative response in specified circumstances. An "alternative response" means a component of the child protective services program that provides for a comprehensive assessment of (1) risk of harm to the child; (2) risk of subsequent child abuse or neglect; (3) family strengths and needs; and (4) the provision of or referral for necessary services. An alternative response does not include an investigation or a formal determination as to whether child abuse or neglect has occurred. Only a low-risk report of abuse or neglect may be considered for an alternative response. Statutory provisions also set forth procedures for an alternative response, including timeframes by which assessments and written reports must be completed.

**State Fiscal Effect:** General fund expenditures for DHS increase *by as much as* \$2.6 million in fiscal 2027 for *personnel* costs, which accounts for the bill's October 1, 2026 effective date. According to an estimate provided by DHS, this reflects the cost of hiring 33 staff (1 director, 1 deputy director, 3 program managers,

3 quality analytics specialists, 3 implementation and training staff, 2 administrative assistants, and 20 intake specialists) to establish a specialized workforce to implement the provisions of the bill. DHS also anticipates the need for (1) a hotline platform at an annual cost of \$230,000; (2) software licenses for new staff at an annual cost of \$34,908; and (3) a one-time programming update for its Child Juvenile and Adult Management System, with general fund expenditures increasing by \$177,048 in fiscal 2027 only. Future year expenditures associated with the aforementioned costs are approximately \$3.9 million annually.

Although the Department of Legislative Services (DLS) generally acknowledges that the bill necessitates additional (and significant) staffing resources, it cannot validate the precise estimate provided by DHS and the overall impact on operations at this time. For example, DLS notes that general administrative responsibilities for local departments of social services that receive reports of suspected abuse or neglect under current practice should decrease once centralized reporting is implemented and reports are assessed for “validity” prior to referral to local departments (although the extent to which intake staff are to make assessments regarding “validity” is unclear). DHS does not appear to account for any potential offset in costs associated with personnel currently receiving and documenting reports. Conversely, DHS also advises that the bill’s provision requiring each report to be *assigned for investigation* could be interpreted to *require an investigation*, which is a departure from current practice that authorizes alternative responses in certain low risk cases, consistent with federal standards under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act and Title IV-E. Should DHS be found out of compliance with federal requirements, federal funding may decrease accordingly.

**Additional Comments:** According to DHS, it received 157,524 calls to its hotline in 2025 reporting suspected child abuse and/or neglect. Additional reports were received in-person, by email, and fax. The average call duration is almost nine minutes.

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### **Additional Information**

**Recent Prior Introductions:** Similar legislation has not been introduced within the last three years.

**Designated Cross File:** HB 1350 (Delegate McComas, *et al.*) - Judiciary.

**Information Source(s):** Harford County; Judiciary (Administrative Office of the Courts); Department of Human Services; Department of Legislative Services

**Fiscal Note History:** First Reader - February 17, 2026  
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