

**Testimony before the House Judiciary Committee
February 15, 2024**

**House Bill 542: Department of Human Services -
Children in Foster Care - Luggage
Support**

The National Association of Social Workers – MD Chapter is the professional organization representing over 3,000 social workers statewide. We are asking for your support for HB 542, which would require the Department of Human Services (DHS) to establish and maintain a supply of new luggage to be used to transport the personal belongings of a child in foster care; require DHS to provide new luggage to a child who is being removed from a household under certain circumstances; and require DHS to maintain certain records regarding luggage and children in foster care.

Ensuring that children separated from their parents as a result of maltreatment or moving placement have luggage to transport their possessions is a no-brainer, and easy to support. Little is more demeaning than being forced to carry one's worldly possessions in a trash bag.

From querying social workers, we were encouraged to learn that DHS's foster parent policy already requires the purchase of luggage, and that local departments have purchased new luggage for years using a variety of funds. We also learned that in the 21 years of DHS's sibling sleepaway camp, Camp Connect, no camper has ever attended without luggage. Nonetheless, centralizing the purchase makes sense and can reasonably assure equitable access across the state without regard to the local department's resources.

With respect to the reporting requirements, we appreciate the keen interest in information about the number of instances when a disposable bag may have been used, and the reason the Department failed to provide new luggage. However, given the hundreds of existing requirements for documentation in an area of human services in which it's relationships that make the difference, not paperwork, social workers offered a cautionary note that a strategy for adding the collection of data from caseworkers about luggage may be a challenge.

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Moreover, in light of children in the state's legal custody with literally nowhere to go – children and youth in hospitals on overstay and in hotels with 1:1 at a cost of roughly \$40,000 to \$60,000 month per child - social workers were hopeful that there might be as much concern about a place for the children to go as there is about luggage to bring with them.

In summary, maltreated children and youth who are separated from their parents and in the state's custody are entitled to the best possible care. As a sign in a colleague's office read, "If we are doing things to a child we wouldn't do with our own, we need to stop and ask ourselves why." While we have some significant progress to be made on supportive and therapeutic places for our children and youth to live, we can at least be sure their belongings aren't carried in trash bags.

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