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CHAPTER 7.

 CHILD PROTECTION AND PERMANENCY

ARTICLE 1.

 GENERAL PROVISIONS

**SECTION 63‑7‑10.** Purpose.

(A) Any intervention by the State into family life on behalf of children must be guided by law, by strong philosophical underpinnings, and by sound professional standards for practice. Child welfare services must be based on these principles:

(1) Parents have the primary responsibility for and are the primary resource for their children.

(2) Children should have the opportunity to grow up in a family unit if at all possible.

(3) State and community agencies have a responsibility to implement prevention programs aimed at identifying high risk families and to provide supportive intervention to reduce occurrence of maltreatment.

(4) Services for families should be accessible and designed to encourage and enable families to adequately deal with their problems within their own family system.

(5) All child welfare intervention by the State has as its primary goal the welfare and safety of the child.

(6) Child welfare intervention into a family’s life should be structured so as to avoid a child’s entry into the protective service and foster care systems if at all possible.

(7) The state’s child welfare system must be designed to be child‑centered, family‑focused, community‑based, and culturally competent in its prevention and protection efforts.

(8) Neighborhoods and communities are the primary source of opportunities and supports for families and have a primary responsibility in assuring the safety and vitality of their members.

(9) The Department of Social Services shall collaborate with the community to identify, support, and treat families in a nonthreatening manner, in both investigative and family assessment situations.

(10) A family assessment approach, stressing the safety of the child, building on the strengths of the family, and identifying and treating the family’s needs is the appropriate approach for cases not requiring law enforcement involvement or the removal of the child.

(11) Only a comparatively small percentage of current child abuse and neglect reports are criminal in nature or will result in the removal of the child or alleged perpetrator.

(12) Should removal of a child become necessary, the state’s foster care system must be prepared to provide timely and appropriate placements for children with relatives or in licensed foster care settings and to establish a plan which reflects a commitment by the State to achieving permanency for the child within reasonable timelines.

(13) The Department of Social Services staff who investigates serious child abuse and neglect reports with law enforcement must be competent in law enforcement procedures, fact finding, evidence gathering, and effective social intervention and assessment.

(14) Services should be identified quickly and should build on the strengths and resources of families and communities.

(B) It is the purpose of this chapter to:

(1) acknowledge the different intervention needs of families;

(2) establish an effective system of services throughout the State to safeguard the well‑being and development of endangered children and to preserve and stabilize family life, whenever appropriate;

(3) ensure permanency on a timely basis for children when removal from their homes is necessary;

(4) establish fair and equitable procedures, compatible with due process of law to intervene in family life with due regard to the safety and welfare of all family members; and

(5) establish an effective system of protection of children from injury and harm while living in public and private residential agencies and institutions meant to serve them.

**SECTION 63‑7‑20.** Definitions.

When used in this chapter or Chapter 9 or 11 and unless the specific context indicates otherwise:

(1) “Abandonment of a child” means a parent or guardian wilfully deserts a child or wilfully surrenders physical possession of a child without making adequate arrangements for the child’s needs or the continuing care of the child.

(2) “Affirmative determination” means a finding by a preponderance of evidence that the child was abused or neglected by the person who is alleged or determined to have abused or neglected the child and who is mentioned by name in a report or finding. This finding may be made only by:

(a) the court;

(b) the Department of Social Services upon a final agency decision in its appeals process; or

(c) waiver by the subject of the report of his right to appeal. If an affirmative determination is made by the court after an affirmative determination is made by the Department of Social Services, the court’s finding must be the affirmative determination.

(3) “Child” means a person under the age of eighteen.

(4) “Child abuse or neglect” or “harm” occurs when the parent, guardian, or other person responsible for the child’s welfare:

(a) inflicts or allows to be inflicted upon the child physical or mental injury or engages in acts or omissions which present a substantial risk of physical or mental injury to the child, including injuries sustained as a result of excessive corporal punishment, but excluding corporal punishment or physical discipline which:

(i) is administered by a parent or person in loco parentis;

(ii) is perpetrated for the sole purpose of restraining or correcting the child;

(iii) is reasonable in manner and moderate in degree;

(iv) has not brought about permanent or lasting damage to the child; and

(v) is not reckless or grossly negligent behavior by the parents.

(b) commits or allows to be committed against the child a sexual offense as defined by the laws of this State or engages in acts or omissions that present a substantial risk that a sexual offense as defined in the laws of this State would be committed against the child;

(c) fails to supply the child with adequate food, clothing, shelter, or education as required under Article 1 of Chapter 65 of Title 59, supervision appropriate to the child’s age and development, or health care though financially able to do so or offered financial or other reasonable means to do so and the failure to do so has caused or presents a substantial risk of causing physical or mental injury. However, a child’s absences from school may not be considered abuse or neglect unless the school has made efforts to bring about the child’s attendance, and those efforts were unsuccessful because of the parents’ refusal to cooperate. For the purpose of this chapter “adequate health care” includes any medical or nonmedical remedial health care permitted or authorized under state law;

(d) abandons the child;

(e) encourages, condones, or approves the commission of delinquent acts by the child and the commission of the acts are shown to be the result of the encouragement, condonation, or approval; or

(f) has committed abuse or neglect as described in subsections (a) through (e) such that a child who subsequently becomes part of the person’s household is at substantial risk of one of those forms of abuse or neglect.

(5) “Child protective investigation” means an inquiry conducted by the department in response to a report of child abuse or neglect made pursuant to this chapter.

(6) “Child protective services” means assistance provided by the department as a result of indicated reports or affirmative determinations of child abuse or neglect, including assistance ordered by the family court or consented to by the family. The objectives of child protective services are to:

(a) protect the child’s safety and welfare; and

(b) maintain the child within the family unless the safety of the child requires placement outside the home.

(7) “Court” means the family court.

(8) “Department” means the Department of Social Services.

(9) “Emergency protective custody” means the right to physical custody of a child for a temporary period of no more than twenty‑four hours to protect the child from imminent danger.

Emergency protective custody may be taken only by a law enforcement officer pursuant to this chapter.

(10) “Guardianship of a child” means the duty and authority vested in a person by the family court to make certain decisions regarding a child, including:

(a) consenting to a marriage, enlistment in the armed forces, and medical and surgical treatment;

(b) representing a child in legal actions and to make other decisions of substantial legal significance affecting a child; and

(c) rights and responsibilities of legal custody when legal custody has not been vested by the court in another person, agency, or institution.

(11) “Indicated report” means a report of child abuse or neglect supported by facts which warrant a finding by a preponderance of evidence that abuse or neglect is more likely than not to have occurred.

(12) “Institutional child abuse and neglect” means situations of known or suspected child abuse or neglect where the person responsible for the child’s welfare is the employee of a public or private residential home, institution, or agency.

(13) “Legal custody” means the right to the physical custody, care, and control of a child; the right to determine where the child shall live; the right and duty to provide protection, food, clothing, shelter, ordinary medical care, education, supervision, and discipline for a child and in an emergency to authorize surgery or other extraordinary care. The court may in its order place other rights and duties with the legal custodian. Unless otherwise provided by court order, the parent or guardian retains the right to make decisions of substantial legal significance affecting the child, including consent to a marriage, enlistment in the armed forces, and major nonemergency medical and surgical treatment, the obligation to provide financial support or other funds for the care of the child, and other residual rights or obligations as may be provided by order of the court.

(14) “Mental injury” means an injury to the intellectual, emotional, or psychological capacity or functioning of a child as evidenced by a discernible and substantial impairment of the child’s ability to function when the existence of that impairment is supported by the opinion of a mental health professional or medical professional.

(15) “Party in interest” includes the child, the child’s attorney and guardian ad litem, the natural parent, an individual with physical or legal custody of the child, the foster parent, and the local foster care review board.

(16) “Person responsible for a child’s welfare” includes the child’s parent, guardian, foster parent, an operator, employee, or caregiver, as defined by Section 63‑13‑20, of a public or private residential home, institution, agency, or childcare facility or an adult who has assumed the role or responsibility of a parent or guardian for the child, but who does not necessarily have legal custody of the child. A person whose only role is as a caregiver and whose contact is only incidental with a child, such as a babysitter or a person who has only incidental contact but may not be a caretaker, has not assumed the role or responsibility of a parent or guardian. An investigation pursuant to Section 63‑7‑920 must be initiated when the information contained in a report otherwise sufficient under this section does not establish whether the person has assumed the role or responsibility of a parent or guardian for the child.

(17) “Physical custody” means the lawful, actual possession and control of a child.

(18) “Physical injury” means death or permanent or temporary disfigurement or impairment of any bodily organ or function.

(19) “Preponderance of evidence” means evidence which, when fairly considered, is more convincing as to its truth than the evidence in opposition.

(20) “Probable cause” means facts and circumstances based upon accurate and reliable information, including hearsay, that would justify a reasonable person to believe that a child subject to a report under this chapter is abused or neglected.

(21) “Protective services unit” means the unit established within the Department of Social Services which has prime responsibility for state efforts to strengthen and improve the prevention, identification, and treatment of child abuse and neglect.

(22) “Subject of the report” means a person who is alleged or determined to have abused or neglected the child, who is mentioned by name in a report or finding.

(23) “Suspected report” means all initial reports of child abuse or neglect received pursuant to this chapter.

(24) “Unfounded report” means a report made pursuant to this chapter for which there is not a preponderance of evidence to believe that the child is abused or neglected. For the purposes of this chapter, it is presumed that all reports are unfounded unless the department determines otherwise.

**SECTION 63‑7‑30.** Seeking assistance.

A person seeking assistance in meeting child care responsibilities may use the services and facilities established by this chapter, including the single statewide telephone number and local child protective services where available. These persons must be referred to appropriate community resources or agencies, notwithstanding whether the problem presented involves child abuse or neglect.

**SECTION 63‑7‑40.** Safe haven for abandoned babies.

(A) A safe haven in this State must, without a court order, take temporary physical custody of an infant who is voluntarily left with the safe haven by a person who does not express an intent to return for the infant and the circumstances give rise to a reasonable belief that the person does not intend to return for the infant. If the safe haven is a hospital or hospital outpatient facility, the hospital or hospital facility shall perform any act necessary to protect the physical health or safety of the infant; any other safe haven shall, as soon as possible, but no later than six hours after receiving an infant, transport the infant to a hospital or hospital outpatient facility. The person leaving the infant is not required to disclose his or her identity; however, the person must leave the infant in the physical custody of a staff member or employee of the safe haven.

(B)(1) The safe haven must offer the person leaving the infant information concerning the legal effect of leaving the infant with the safe haven.

(2) The safe haven must ask the person leaving the infant to identify any parent of the infant other than the person leaving the infant with the safe haven. The safe haven also must attempt to obtain from the person information concerning the infant’s background and medical history as specified on a form provided by the Department of Social Services. This information includes, but is not limited to, information concerning the use of a controlled substance by the infant’s mother, provided that information regarding the use of a controlled substance by the infant’s mother is not admissible as evidence of the unlawful use of a controlled substance in any court proceeding. The safe haven shall give the person a copy of the form and a prepaid envelope for mailing the form to the Department of Social Services if the person does not wish to provide the information to the safe haven. These materials must be provided to safe havens by the department.

(3) Any identifying information disclosed by the person leaving the infant must be kept confidential by the safe haven and disclosed to no one other than the department. However, if a court determines that the immunity provisions of subsection (H) do not apply, the safe haven may disclose the information as permitted by confidentiality protections applicable to records of the safe haven, if the safe haven has such confidentiality protections for records. The department shall maintain confidentiality of this information in accordance with Section 63‑7‑1990.

(C) Not later than the close of the first business day after the date on which a hospital or hospital outpatient facility takes possession of an infant pursuant to subsection (A), the hospital or hospital outpatient facility shall notify the department that it has taken temporary physical custody of the infant. The department has legal custody of the infant immediately upon receipt of the notice. The department shall assume physical control of the infant as soon as practicable upon receipt of the notice, but no later than twenty‑four hours after receiving notice that the infant is ready for discharge from the hospital or hospital outpatient facility. Assumption of custody by the department pursuant to this subsection does not constitute emergency protective custody, and the provisions of Subarticle 3 of Article 3 do not apply. The department is not required to initiate a child protective services investigation solely because an infant comes into its custody under this subsection.

(D) Immediately after receiving notice from a hospital or hospital outpatient facility pursuant to subsection (C), the department shall contact the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division for assistance in assuring that the infant is not a missing infant. The South Carolina Law Enforcement Division shall treat the request as ongoing for a period of thirty days and shall contact the department if a missing infant report is received that might relate to the infant.

(E)(1) Within forty‑eight hours after taking legal custody of the infant, the department shall publish notice, in a newspaper of general circulation in the area where the safe haven that initially took the infant is located, and send a news release to broadcast and print media in the area. The notice and the news release must state the circumstances under which the infant was left at the safe haven, a description of the infant, and the date, time, and place of the permanency planning hearing provided for in subsection (E)(2). The notice and the news release must also state that any person wishing to assert parental rights in regard to the infant must do so at the hearing. If the person leaving the infant identified anyone as being a parent of the infant, the notice must be sent by certified mail to the last known address of the person identified as a parent at least two weeks prior to the hearing.

(2) Within forty‑eight hours after obtaining legal custody of the infant, the department shall file a petition alleging that the infant has been abandoned, that the court should dispense with reasonable efforts to preserve or reunify the family, that continuation of keeping the infant in the home of the parent or parents would be contrary to the welfare of the infant, and that termination of parental rights is in the best interest of the infant. A hearing on the petition must be held no earlier than thirty and no later than sixty days after the department takes legal custody of the infant. This hearing is the permanency planning hearing for the infant. If the court approves the permanent plan of termination of parental rights, the order must also provide that a petition for termination of parental rights on the grounds of abandonment must be filed within ten days after receipt of the order by the department.

(F) The act of leaving an infant with a safe haven pursuant to this section is conclusive evidence that the infant has been abused or neglected for purposes of Department of Social Services’ jurisdiction and for evidentiary purposes in any judicial proceeding in which abuse or neglect of an infant is an issue. It is also conclusive evidence that the requirements for termination of parental rights have been satisfied as to any parent who left the infant or acted in concert with the person leaving the infant.

(G) A person who leaves an infant at a safe haven or directs another person to do so must not be prosecuted for any criminal offense on account of such action if:

(1) the person is a parent of the infant or is acting at the direction of a parent;

(2) the person leaves the infant in the physical custody of a staff member or an employee of the safe haven; and

(3) the infant is not more than thirty days old or the infant is reasonably determined by the hospital or hospital outpatient facility to be not more than thirty days old.

This subsection does not apply to prosecution for the infliction of any harm upon the infant other than the harm inherent in abandonment.

(H) A safe haven and its agents, and any health care professionals practicing within a hospital or hospital outpatient facility, are immune from civil or criminal liability for any action authorized by this section, so long as the safe haven, or health care professional, complies with all provisions of this section.

(I) The department, either alone or in collaboration with any other public entity, shall take appropriate measures to achieve public awareness of the provisions of this section.

(J) For purposes of this section:

(1) “infant” means a person not more than thirty days old; and

(2) “safe haven” means a hospital or hospital outpatient facility, a law enforcement agency, a fire station, an emergency medical services station, or any staffed house of worship during hours when the facility is staffed.

(K) Annually the department shall submit a report to the General Assembly containing data on infants who come into the custody of the department pursuant to this section. The data must include, but are not limited to, the date, time, and place where the infant was left, the hospital to which the infant was taken, the health of the infant at the time of being admitted to the hospital, disposition and placement of the infant, and, if available, circumstances surrounding the infant being left at the safe haven. No data in the report may contain identifying information.

ARTICLE 3.

 IDENTIFICATION, INVESTIGATION, AND INTERVENTION

SUBARTICLE 1.

 IDENTIFYING AND REPORTING CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

**SECTION 63‑7‑310.** Persons required to report.

(A) A physician, nurse, dentist, optometrist, medical examiner, or coroner, or an employee of a county medical examiner’s or coroner’s office, or any other medical, emergency medical services, mental health, or allied health professional, member of the clergy including a Christian Science Practitioner or religious healer, school teacher, counselor, principal, assistant principal, social or public assistance worker, substance abuse treatment staff, or childcare worker in a childcare center or foster care facility, police or law enforcement officer, undertaker, funeral home director or employee of a funeral home, persons responsible for processing films, computer technician, or a judge must report in accordance with this section when in the person’s professional capacity the person has received information which gives the person reason to believe that a child has been or may be abused or neglected as defined in Section 63‑7‑20.

(B) If a person required to report pursuant to subsection (A) has received information in the person’s professional capacity which gives the person reason to believe that a child’s physical or mental health or welfare has been or may be adversely affected by acts or omissions that would be child abuse or neglect if committed by a parent, guardian, or other person responsible for the child’s welfare, but the reporter believes that the act or omission was committed by a person other than the parent, guardian, or other person responsible for the child’s welfare, the reporter must make a report to the appropriate law enforcement agency.

(C) Except as provided in subsection (A), any person who has reason to believe that a child’s physical or mental health or welfare has been or may be adversely affected by abuse and neglect may report in accordance with this section.

(D) Reports of child abuse or neglect may be made orally by telephone or otherwise to the county department of social services or to a law enforcement agency in the county where the child resides or is found.

**SECTION 63‑7‑320.** Notification and transfer.

(A) Where reports are made pursuant to Section 63‑7‑310 to a law enforcement agency, the law enforcement agency shall notify the county department of social services of the law enforcement’s response to the report at the earliest possible time.

(B) Where a county or contiguous counties have established multicounty child protective services, the county department of social services immediately shall transfer reports pursuant to this section to the service.

**SECTION 63‑7‑330.** Confidentiality of information.

(A) The identity of the person making a report pursuant to this section must be kept confidential by the agency or department receiving the report and must not be disclosed except as provided for in subsection (B) or (C) or as otherwise provided for in this chapter.

(B) When the department refers a report to a law enforcement agency for a criminal investigation, the department must inform the law enforcement agency of the identity of the person who reported the child abuse or neglect. The identity of the reporter must only be used by the law enforcement agency to further the criminal investigation arising from the report, and the agency must not disclose the reporter’s identity to any person other than an employee of the agency who is involved in the criminal investigation arising from the report. If the reporter testifies in a criminal proceeding arising from the report, it must not be disclosed that the reporter made the report.

(C) When a law enforcement agency refers a report to the department for an investigation or other response, the law enforcement agency must inform the department of the identity of the person who reported the child abuse or neglect. The department must not disclose the identity of the reporter to any person except as authorized by Section 63‑7‑1990.

**SECTION 63‑7‑340.** Previous reports.

When a report is referred to the department for an investigation or other response, the department must determine whether previous reports have been made regarding the same child or the same subject of the report. In determining whether previous reports have been made, the department must determine whether there are any suspected, indicated, or unfounded reports maintained pursuant to Section 63‑7‑930 regarding the same child or the same subject of the report.

**SECTION 63‑7‑350.** Reports for lack of investigation.

If the department does not conduct an investigation as a result of information received pursuant to this subarticle, the department must make a record of the information and must classify the record as a Category IV unfounded report in accordance with Section 63‑7‑930. The department and law enforcement are authorized to use information recorded pursuant to this section for purposes of assessing risk and safety if additional contacts are made concerning the child, the family, or the subject of the report.

**SECTION 63‑7‑360.** Mandatory reporting to coroner.

A person required under Section 63‑7‑310 to report cases of suspected child abuse or neglect, including workers of the department, who has reason to believe a child has died as the result of child abuse or neglect, shall report this information to the appropriate medical examiner or coroner. Any other person who has reason to believe that a child has died as a result of child abuse or neglect may report this information to the appropriate medical examiner or coroner. The medical examiner or coroner shall accept the report for investigation and shall report his findings to the appropriate law enforcement agency, circuit solicitor’s office, the county department of social services and, if the institution making a report is a hospital, to the hospital.

**SECTION 63‑7‑370.** Domestic violence reporting.

The law enforcement officer upon receipt of a report of domestic violence may report this information to the Department of Social Services. The department may treat the case as suspected report of abuse and may investigate the case as in other allegations of abuse in order to determine if the child has been harmed.

**SECTION 63‑7‑380.** Photos and x‑rays without parental consent.

A person required to report under Section 63‑7‑310 may take, or cause to be taken, color photographs of the areas of trauma visible on a child who is the subject of a report and, if medically indicated, a physician may cause to be performed a radiological examination or other medical examinations or tests of the child without the consent of the child’s parents or guardians. Copies of all photographs, negatives, radiological, and other medical reports must be sent to the department at the time a report pursuant to Section 63‑7‑310 is made, or as soon as reasonably possible after the report is made.

**SECTION 63‑7‑390.** Reporter immunity from liability.

A person required or permitted to report pursuant to Section 63‑7‑310 or who participates in an investigation or judicial proceedings resulting from the report, acting in good faith, is immune from civil and criminal liability which might otherwise result by reason of these actions. In all such civil or criminal proceedings, good faith is rebuttably presumed. Immunity under this section extends to full disclosure by the person of facts which gave the person reason to believe that the child’s physical or mental health or welfare had been or might be adversely affected by abuse or neglect.

**SECTION 63‑7‑400.** DSS immunity from liability.

An employee, volunteer, or official of the Department of Social Services required or authorized to perform child protective or child welfare‑related functions or an individual with whom the department has contracted to convene family group conferences or a law enforcement officer required or authorized to perform child protective or child welfare related functions is immune from civil or criminal liability which might otherwise result by reason of acts or omissions within the scope of the official duties of the employee, volunteer, convener, officer, or official, as long as the employee, volunteer, convener, officer, or official acted in good faith and was not reckless, wilful, wanton, or grossly negligent. In all such civil or criminal proceedings good faith is rebuttably presumed. This grant of immunity is cumulative to and does not replace any other immunity provided under the South Carolina Tort Claims Act.

**SECTION 63‑7‑410.** Failure to report; penalties.

A person required to report a case of child abuse or neglect or a person required to perform any other function under this article who knowingly fails to do so, or a person who threatens or attempts to intimidate a witness is guilty of a misdemeanor and, upon conviction, must be fined not more than five hundred dollars or imprisoned not more than six months, or both.

**SECTION 63‑7‑420.** Abrogation of privileged communication; exceptions.

The privileged quality of communication between husband and wife and any professional person and his patient or client, except that between attorney and client or clergy member, including Christian Science Practitioner or religious healer, and penitent, is abrogated and does not constitute grounds for failure to report or the exclusion of evidence in a civil protective proceeding resulting from a report pursuant to this article. However, a clergy member, including Christian Science Practitioner or religious healer, must report in accordance with this subarticle except when information is received from the alleged perpetrator of the abuse and neglect during a communication that is protected by the clergy and penitent privilege as provided for in Section 19‑11‑90.

**SECTION 63‑7‑430.** Civil action for bad faith reporting.

(A) If the family court determines pursuant to Section 63‑7‑2000 that a person has made a report of suspected child abuse or neglect maliciously or in bad faith or if a person has been found guilty of making a false report pursuant to Section 63‑7‑440, the department may bring a civil action to recover the costs of the department’s investigation and proceedings associated with the investigation, including attorney’s fees. The department also is entitled to recover costs and attorney’s fees incurred in the civil action authorized by this section. The decision of whether to bring a civil action pursuant to this section is in the sole discretion of the department.

(B) If the family court determines pursuant to Section 63‑7‑2000 that a person has made a false report of suspected child abuse or neglect maliciously or in bad faith or if a person has been found guilty of making a false report pursuant to Section 63‑7‑440, a person who was subject of the false report has a civil cause of action against the person who made the false report and is entitled to recover from the person who made the false report such relief as may be appropriate, including:

(1) actual damages;

(2) punitive damages; and

(3) a reasonable attorney’s fee and other litigation costs reasonably incurred.

**SECTION 63‑7‑440.** Knowingly making false report.

(A) It is unlawful to knowingly make a false report of abuse or neglect.

(B) A person who violates subsection (A) is guilty of a misdemeanor and, upon conviction, must be fined not more than five thousand dollars or imprisoned not more than ninety days, or both.

**SECTION 63‑7‑450.** DSS to provide information to public.

(A) The Department of Social Services Protective Services shall inform all persons required to report under this subarticle of the nature, problem, and extent of child abuse and neglect and of their duties and responsibilities in accordance with this article. The department also, on a continuing basis, shall conduct training programs for department staff and appropriate training for persons required to report under this subarticle.

(B) The department, on a continuing basis, shall inform the public of the nature, problem, and extent of the child abuse and neglect and of the remedial and therapeutic services available to children and their families. The department shall encourage families to seek help consistent with Section 63‑7‑30.

(C) The department, on a continuing basis, shall actively publicize the appropriate telephone numbers to receive reports of suspected child abuse and neglect, including the twenty‑four hour, statewide, toll‑free telephone service and respective numbers of the county department offices.

SUBARTICLE 3.

 EMERGENCY PROTECTIVE CUSTODY

**SECTION 63‑7‑610.** Statewide jurisdiction.

(A) A law enforcement officer investigating a case of suspected child abuse or neglect or responding to a request for assistance by the department as it investigates a case of suspected child abuse or neglect has authority to take emergency protective custody of the child pursuant to this subarticle in all counties and municipalities.

(B) Immediately upon taking emergency protective custody, the law enforcement officer shall notify the local office of the department responsible to the county in which the activity under investigation occurred.

(C) The department shall designate by policy and procedure the local department office responsible for procedures required by this subarticle when a child resides in a county other than the one in which the activity under investigation occurred. The probable cause hearing required by Section 63‑7‑710 may be held in the county of the child’s residence or the county of the law enforcement officer’s jurisdiction.

**SECTION 63‑7‑620.** Emergency protective custody.

(A) A law enforcement officer may take emergency protective custody of a child without the consent of the child’s parents, guardians, or others exercising temporary or permanent control over the child if:

(1) the officer has probable cause to believe that by reason of abuse or neglect the child’s life, health, or physical safety is in substantial and imminent danger if the child is not taken into emergency protective custody, and there is not time to apply for a court order pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1660. When a child is taken into emergency protective custody following an incident of excessive corporal punishment, and the only injury to the child is external lesions or minor bruises, other children in the home shall not be taken into emergency protective custody solely on account of the injury of one child through excessive corporal punishment. However, the officer may take emergency protective custody of other children in the home if a threat of harm to them is further indicated by factors including, but not limited to, a prior history of domestic violence or other abuse in the home, alcohol or drug abuse if known or evident at the time of the initial contact, or other circumstances indicative of danger to the children;

(2) the child’s parent, parents, or guardian has been arrested or the child has become lost accidentally and as a result the child’s welfare is threatened due to loss of adult protection and supervision; and

(a) in the circumstances of arrest, the parent, parents, or guardian does not consent in writing to another person assuming physical custody of the child;

(b) in the circumstances of a lost child, a search by law enforcement has not located the parent, parents, or guardian.

(B)(1) If the child is in need of emergency medical care at the time the child is taken into emergency protective custody, the officer shall transport the child to an appropriate health care facility. Emergency medical care may be provided to the child without consent, as provided in Section 63‑5‑350. The parent or guardian is responsible for the cost of emergency medical care that is provided to the child. However, the parent or guardian is not responsible for the cost of medical examinations performed at the request of law enforcement or the department solely for the purpose of assessing whether the child has been abused or neglected unless it is determined that the child has been harmed as defined in this chapter.

(2) If the child is not in need of emergency medical care, the officer or the department shall transport the child to a place agreed upon by the department and law enforcement, and the department within two hours shall assume physical control of the child and shall place the child in a licensed foster home or shelter within a reasonable period of time. In no case may the child be placed in a jail or other secure facility or a facility for the detention of criminal or juvenile offenders. While the child is in its custody, the department shall provide for the needs of the child and assure that a child of school age who is physically able to do so continues attending school.

**SECTION 63‑7‑630.** Notification of DSS.

When an officer takes a child into emergency protective custody under this subarticle, the officer immediately shall notify the department. The department shall notify the parent, guardian, or other person exercising temporary or permanent control over the child as early as reasonably possible of the location of the child unless there are compelling reasons for believing that disclosure of this information would be contrary to the best interests of the child.

**SECTION 63‑7‑640.** Preliminary investigation.

The department shall conduct within twenty‑four hours after the child is taken into emergency protective custody by law enforcement or pursuant to ex parte order a preliminary investigation to determine whether grounds for assuming legal custody of the child exist and whether reasonable means exist for avoiding removal of the child from the home of the parent or guardian or for placement of the child with a relative and means for minimizing the emotional impact on the child of separation from the child’s home and family. During this time the department, if possible, shall convene, a meeting with the child’s parents or guardian, extended family, and other relevant persons to discuss the family’s problems that led to intervention and possible corrective actions, including placement of the child.

**SECTION 63‑7‑650.** Risk assessment before placement.

Before agreeing to or acquiescing in a corrective action that involves placement of the child with a relative or other person or making an interim placement with a relative while retaining custody of the child or as soon as possible after agreeing to or acquiescing in a corrective action, the department shall secure from the relative or other person and other adults in the home an affidavit attesting to information necessary to determine whether a criminal history or history of child abuse or neglect exists and whether this history indicates there is a significant risk that the child would be threatened with abuse or neglect in the home of the relative or other person. As soon as possible, the department shall confirm the information supplied in the affidavit by checking the Central Registry of Child Abuse and Neglect, other relevant department records, county sex offender registries, and records for the preceding five years of law enforcement agencies in the jurisdiction in which the relative or other person resides and, to the extent reasonably possible, jurisdictions in which the relative or other person has resided during that period. The department must not agree to or acquiesce in a placement if the affidavit or these records reveal information indicating there is a significant risk that the child would be threatened with abuse or neglect in the home of the relative or other person. The relative or other person must consent to a check of the above records by the department.

**SECTION 63‑7‑660.** Assumption of legal custody.

If the department determines after the preliminary investigation that there is probable cause to believe that by reason of abuse or neglect the child’s life, health, or physical safety is in imminent and substantial danger, the department may assume legal custody of the child without the consent of the child’s parent, guardian, or custodian. The department shall make every reasonable effort to notify the child’s parent, guardian, or custodian of the location of the child and shall make arrangements for temporary visitation unless there are compelling reasons why visitation or notice of the location of the child would be contrary to the best interests of the child. The notification must be in writing and shall include notice of the right to a hearing and right to counsel pursuant to this article. Nothing in this section authorizes the department to physically remove a child from the care of the child’s parent or guardian without an order of the court. The department may exercise the authority to assume legal custody only after a law enforcement officer has taken emergency protective custody of the child or the family court has granted emergency protective custody by ex parte order, and the department has conducted a preliminary investigation pursuant to Section 63‑7‑640.

**SECTION 63‑7‑670.** Returning child to parents; alternative procedures.

If emergency protective custody of the child was taken by a law enforcement officer pursuant to this subarticle, and the department concludes after the preliminary investigation that the child should be returned to the child’s parent, guardian, or custodian, the department shall consult with the law enforcement officer who took emergency protective custody unless the department and the law enforcement agency have agreed to an alternative procedure. If the officer objects to the return of the child, the department must assume legal custody of the child until a probable cause hearing can be held. The alternative procedure agreed to by the department and the law enforcement agency may provide that the child must be retained in custody if the officer cannot be contacted, conditions under which the child may be returned home if the officer cannot be contacted, other persons within the law enforcement agency who are to be consulted instead of the officer, or other procedures. If no alternative procedure has been agreed to and the department is unable to contact the law enforcement officer after reasonable efforts to do so, the department shall consult with the officer’s designee or the officer’s agency.

**SECTION 63‑7‑680.** Emergency protective custody extension.

The period of emergency protective custody may be extended for up to twenty‑four additional hours if:

(1) the department concludes that the child is to be placed with a relative or other person instead of taking legal custody of the child;

(2) the department requests the appropriate law enforcement agency to check for records concerning the relative or other person, or any adults in that person’s home; and

(3) the law enforcement agency notifies the department that the extension is needed to enable the law enforcement agency to complete its record check before the department’s decision on whether to take legal custody of the child.

**SECTION 63‑7‑690.** Relative placement.

(A) If within the twenty‑four hours following removal of the child:

(1) the department has identified a specified relative or other person with whom it has determined that the child is to be placed instead of the department’s taking legal custody of the child; and

(2) both the relative or other person with whom the child is to be placed and the child’s parent or guardian have agreed to the placement, the department may retain physical custody of the child for no more than five additional days if necessary to enable the relative or other person to make travel or other arrangements incident to the placement.

(B) A probable cause hearing pursuant to Section 63‑7‑710 shall not be held unless the placement fails to occur as planned within the five‑day period or the child’s parent or guardian makes a written request for a hearing to the department. The department must give the child’s parent or guardian written notice of the right to request a probable cause hearing to obtain a judicial determination of whether removal of the child from the home was and remains necessary. Upon receipt of a written request for a hearing from the child’s parent or guardian, the department shall schedule a hearing for the next date on which the family court is scheduled to hear probable cause hearings.

(C) If the placement does not occur as planned within the five‑day period, the department immediately must determine whether to assume legal custody of the child and file a petition as provided in Section 63‑7‑700(B). The department shall assure that the child is given age‑appropriate information about the plans for placement and any subsequent changes in those plans at the earliest feasible time.

**SECTION 63‑7‑700.** Emergency protective custody proceedings.

(A) If a law enforcement officer clearly states to the department at the time the officer delivers physical control of the child to the department that the child is not to be returned to the home or placed with a relative before a probable cause hearing regardless of the outcome of a preliminary investigation, the department immediately must take legal custody of the child. In this case, at a minimum, the department shall conduct a preliminary investigation as provided in Section 63‑7‑640 within seventy‑two hours after the child was taken into emergency protective custody and shall make recommendations concerning return of the child to the home or placement with a relative or other person to the family court at the probable cause hearing or take other appropriate action as provided in this chapter.

(B)(1) The department, upon assuming legal custody of the child, shall begin a child protective investigation, including immediate attention to the protection of other children in the home, or other setting where the child was found. The department shall initiate a removal proceeding in the appropriate family court pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1660 on or before the next working day after initiating the investigation. If a noncustodial parent is not named as a party, the department shall exercise every reasonable effort to promptly notify the noncustodial parent that a removal proceeding has been initiated and of the date and time of any hearings scheduled pursuant to this subarticle.

(2) Upon a determination by the department before the probable cause hearing that there is not a preponderance of evidence that child abuse or neglect occurred, the department may place physical custody of the child with the parent, parents, guardian, immediate family member, or relative, with the department retaining legal custody pending the probable cause hearing.

(3) When the facts and circumstances of the report clearly indicate that no abuse or neglect occurred, the report promptly must be determined to be unfounded, and the department shall exercise reasonable efforts to expedite the placement of the child with the parent, parents, guardian, immediate family member, or relative.

(C) If the child is returned to the child’s parent, guardian, or custodian following the preliminary investigation, a probable cause hearing must be held if requested by the child’s parent, guardian, or custodian or the department or the law enforcement agency that took emergency protective custody of the child. The request must be made in writing to the court within ten days after the child is returned. A probable cause hearing pursuant to Section 63‑7‑710 must be scheduled within seven days of the request to determine whether there was probable cause to take emergency physical custody of the child.

**SECTION 63‑7‑710.** Probable cause hearing.

(A) The family court shall schedule a probable cause hearing to be held within seventy‑two hours of the time the child was taken into emergency protective custody. If the third day falls upon a Saturday, Sunday, or holiday, the probable cause hearing must be held no later than the next working day. If there is no term of court in the county when the probable cause hearing must be held, the hearing must be held in another county in the circuit. If there is no term of family court in another county in the circuit, the probable cause hearing may be heard in another court in an adjoining circuit.

(B) The probable cause hearing may be conducted by video conference at the discretion of the judge.

(C) At the probable cause hearing, the family court shall undertake to fulfill the requirements of Section 63‑7‑1620 and shall determine whether there was probable cause for taking emergency protective custody and for the department to assume legal custody of the child and shall determine whether probable cause to retain legal custody of the child remains at the time of the hearing.

(D) At the probable cause hearing, the respondents may submit affidavits as to facts which are alleged to form the basis of the removal and to cross‑examine the department’s witnesses as to whether there existed probable cause to effect emergency removal.

(E) The hearing on the merits to determine whether removal of custody is needed, pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1660, must be held within thirty‑five days of the date of receipt of the removal petition. At the probable cause hearing, the court shall set the time and date for the hearing on the merits. A party may request a continuance that would result in the hearing being held more than thirty‑five days after the petition was filed, and the court may grant the request for continuance only if exceptional circumstances exist. If a continuance is granted, the hearing on the merits must be completed within sixty‑five days following receipt of the removal petition. The court may continue the hearing on the merits beyond sixty‑five days without returning the child to the home only if the court issues a written order with findings of fact supporting a determination that the following conditions are satisfied, regardless of whether the parties have agreed to a continuance:

(1) the court finds that the child should remain in the custody of the department because there is probable cause to believe that returning the child to the home would seriously endanger the child’s physical safety or emotional well‑being;

(2) the court schedules the case for trial on a date and time certain which is not more than thirty days after the date the hearing was scheduled to be held; and

(3) the court finds that exceptional circumstances support the continuance or the parties and the guardian ad litem agree to a continuance.

(F) The court may continue the case past the date and time certain set forth in subsection (E) only if the court issues a new order as required in subsection (E).

(G) The court may continue the case because a witness is unavailable only if the court enters a finding of fact that the court cannot decide the case without the testimony of the witness. The court shall consider and rule on whether the hearing can begin and then recess to have the witness’ testimony taken at a later date or by deposition. The court shall rule on whether the party offering the witness has exercised due diligence to secure the presence of the witness or to preserve the witness’ testimony.

(H) This section does not prevent the court from conducting a pendente lite hearing on motion of any party and issuing an order granting other appropriate relief pending a hearing on the merits.

(I) If the child is returned to the home pending the merits hearing, the court may impose such terms and conditions as it determines appropriate to protect the child from harm, including measures to protect the child as a witness.

(J) When a continuance is granted pursuant to this section, the family court shall ensure that the hearing is rescheduled within the time limits provided in this section and give the hearing priority over other matters pending before the court except a probable cause hearing held pursuant to this section, a detention hearing held pursuant to Section 63‑19‑830, or a hearing held pursuant to Section 63‑19‑1030 or 63‑19‑1210 concerning a child who is in state custody pursuant to Chapter 19. An exception also may be made for child custody hearings if the court, in its discretion, makes a written finding stating compelling reasons, relating to the welfare of the child, for giving priority to the custody hearing.

**SECTION 63‑7‑720.** Reasonable efforts to prevent removal.

(A) An order issued as a result of the probable cause hearing held pursuant to Section 63‑7‑710 concerning a child of whom the department has assumed legal custody shall contain a finding by the court of whether reasonable efforts were made by the department to prevent removal of the child and a finding of whether continuation of the child in the home would be contrary to the welfare of the child. The order shall state:

(1) the services made available to the family before the department assumed legal custody of the child and how they related to the needs of the family;

(2) the efforts of the department to provide services to the family before assuming legal custody of the child;

(3) why the efforts to provide services did not eliminate the need for the department to assume legal custody;

(4) whether a meeting was convened as provided in Section 63‑7‑640, the persons present, and the outcome of the meeting or, if no meeting was held, the reason for not holding a meeting;

(5) what efforts were made to place the child with a relative known to the child or in another familiar environment;

(6) whether the efforts to eliminate the need for the department to assume legal custody were reasonable including, but not limited to, whether services were reasonably available and timely, reasonably adequate to address the needs of the family, reasonably adequate to protect the child and realistic under the circumstances, and whether efforts to place the child in a familiar environment were reasonable.

(B) If the court finds that reasonable services would not have allowed the child to remain safely in the home, the court shall find that removal of the child without services or without further services was reasonable.

**SECTION 63‑7‑730.** Expedited relative placement.

If the court orders the child to remain in the legal custody of the department at the probable cause hearing, the family court may order expedited placement of the child with a relative of the first or second degree. The court shall require the department to check the names of all adults in the home against the Central Registry of Child Abuse and Neglect, other relevant records of the department, county sex abuse registers, and records for the preceding five years of law enforcement agencies in the jurisdiction in which the person resides and, to the extent reasonably possible, jurisdictions in which the person has resided during that period. The court may hold open the record of the probable cause hearing for twenty‑four hours to receive the reports and based on these reports and other information introduced at the probable cause hearing, the court may order expedited placement of the child in the home of the relative. Nothing in this section precludes the department from requesting or the court from ordering pursuant to the department’s request either a full study of the relative’s home before placement or the licensing or approval of the relative’s home before placement.

**SECTION 63‑7‑740.** Ex parte emergency protective custody.

(A) The family court may order ex parte that a child be taken into emergency protective custody without the consent of parents, guardians, or others exercising temporary or permanent control over the child if:

(1) the family court judge determines there is probable cause to believe that by reason of abuse or neglect there exists an imminent and substantial danger to the child’s life, health, or physical safety; and

(2) parents, guardians, or others exercising temporary or permanent control over the child are unavailable or do not consent to the child’s removal from their custody.

(B) If the court issues such an order, the department shall conduct a preliminary investigation and otherwise proceed as provided in this subarticle.

**SECTION 63‑7‑750.** Doctor or hospital may detain child; civil immunity.

(A) A physician or hospital to which a child has been brought for treatment may detain the child for up to twenty‑four hours without the consent of the person responsible for the child’s welfare if the physician or hospital:

(1) has reason to believe that the child has been abused or neglected;

(2) has made a report to a law enforcement agency and the department pursuant to Section 63‑7‑310, stating the time the physician notified the agency or department that the child was being detained until a law enforcement officer could arrive to determine whether the officer should take emergency physical custody of the child pursuant to Subarticle 3; and

(3) has reason to believe that release of the child to the child’s parent, guardian, custodian, or caretaker presents an imminent danger to the child’s life, health, or physical safety. A hospital must designate a qualified person or persons within the hospital who shall have sole authority to detain a child on behalf of the hospital.

(B) A physician or hospital that detains a child in good faith as provided in this section is immune from civil or criminal liability for detaining the child.

**SECTION 63‑7‑760.** Protocols.

The department and local law enforcement agencies shall develop written protocols to address issues related to emergency protective custody. The protocols shall cover at a minimum information exchange between the department and local law enforcement agencies, consultation on decisions to assume legal custody, and the transfer of responsibility over the child, including mechanisms and assurances for the department to arrange expeditious placement of the child.

SUBARTICLE 5.

 INTAKE AND INVESTIGATION DUTIES OF THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

**SECTION 63‑7‑900.** Purpose of subarticle.

(A) It is the purpose of this subarticle to encourage the voluntary acceptance of any service offered by the department in connection with child abuse and neglect or another problem of a nature affecting the stability of family life.

(B) The department must be staffed adequately with persons trained in the investigation of suspected child abuse and neglect and in the provision of services to abused and neglected children and their families.

(C) The department actively must seek the cooperation and involvement of local public and private institutions, groups, and programs concerned with matters of child protection and welfare within the area it serves.

(D) In all instances, the agency must act in accordance with the policies, procedures, and regulations promulgated and distributed by the State Department of Social Services pursuant to this chapter.

**SECTION 63‑7‑910.** Duties of DSS.

(A)(1) The Department of Social Services may maintain a toll‑free number available to persons throughout the State for the referral of family‑related problems, including:

(a) the reporting of known or suspected cases of child abuse or neglect;

(b) other problems of a nature which may affect the stability of family life.

(2) This telephone service shall operate continuously. Upon receipt of a call involving suspected abuse or neglect, the Department of Social Services shall transmit the full contents of the report to the appropriate county department office. Immediately upon transmitting the report the department shall destroy the contents of the suspected report. Upon receipt of a call involving other problems of a nature which may affect the stability of family life, the department shall refer the call to the appropriate county department office or other service agency where appropriate.

(B) The department shall have within it a separate organizational unit administered within the department with qualified staff and resources sufficient to fulfill the purposes and functions assigned to it by this article.

(C) The department’s responsibilities shall include, but are not limited to:

(1) assigning and monitoring initial child protection responsibility through periodic review of services offered throughout the State;

(2) assisting in the diagnosis of child abuse and neglect;

(3) coordinating referrals of known or suspected child abuse and neglect;

(4) measuring the effectiveness of existing child protection programs and facilitating research, planning, and program development; and

(5) establishing and monitoring a statewide Central Registry for Child Abuse and Neglect.

(D) The department may contract for the delivery of protective services, family preservation services, foster care services, family reunification services, adoptions services, and other related services or programs. The department shall remain responsible for the quality of the services or programs and shall ensure that each contract contains provisions requiring the provider to deliver services in accordance with departmental policies and state and federal law.

(E) The department may promulgate regulations and formulate policies and methods of administration to carry out effectively child protective services, activities, and responsibilities.

**SECTION 63‑7‑920.** Investigations and case determination.

(A)(1) Within twenty‑four hours of the receipt of a report of suspected child abuse or neglect or within twenty‑four hours after the department has assumed legal custody of a child pursuant to Section 63‑7‑660 or 63‑7‑670 or within twenty‑four hours after being notified that a child has been taken into emergency protective custody, the department must begin an appropriate and thorough investigation to determine whether a report of suspected child abuse or neglect is “indicated” or “unfounded”.

(2) The finding must be made no later than forty‑five days from the receipt of the report. A single extension of no more than fifteen days may be granted by the director of the department, or the director’s designee, for good cause shown, pursuant to guidelines adopted by the department.

(3) If the investigation cannot be completed because the department is unable to locate the child or family or for other compelling reasons, the report may be classified as unfounded Category III and the investigation may be reopened at a later date if the child or family is located or the compelling reason for failure to complete the investigation is removed. The department must make a finding within forty‑five days after the investigation is reopened.

(B) The department may file with the family court an affidavit and a petition to support issuance of a warrant at any time after receipt of a report. The family court must issue the warrant if the affidavit and petition establish probable cause to believe the child is an abused or neglected child and that the investigation cannot be completed without issuance of the warrant. The warrant may authorize the department to interview the child, to inspect the condition of the child, to inspect the premises where the child may be located or may reside, and to obtain copies of medical, school, or other records concerning the child.

(C) The department or law enforcement, or both, may interview the child alleged to have been abused or neglected and any other child in the household during the investigation. The interviews may be conducted on school premises, at childcare facilities, at the child’s home or at other suitable locations and in the discretion of the department or law enforcement, or both, may be conducted outside the presence of the parents. To the extent reasonably possible, the needs and interests of the child must be accommodated in making arrangements for interviews, including time, place, method of obtaining the child’s presence, and conduct of the interview. The department or law enforcement, or both, shall provide notification of the interview to the parents as soon as reasonably possible during the investigation if notice will not jeopardize the safety of the child or the course of the investigation. All state, law enforcement, and community agencies providing child welfare intervention into a child’s life should coordinate their services to minimize the number of interviews of the child to reduce potential emotional trauma to the child.

(D) The department must furnish to parents or guardians on a standardized form the following information as soon as reasonably possible after commencing the investigation:

(1) the names of the investigators;

(2) the allegations being investigated;

(3) whether the person’s name has been recorded by the department as a suspected perpetrator of abuse or neglect;

(4) the right to inspect department records concerning the investigation;

(5) statutory and family court remedies available to complete the investigation and to protect the child if the parent or guardian or subject of the report indicates a refusal to cooperate;

(6) how information provided by the parent or guardian may be used;

(7) the possible outcomes of the investigation; and

(8) the telephone number and name of a department employee available to answer questions.

(E) This subarticle does not require the department to investigate reports of child abuse or neglect which resulted in the death of the child unless there are other children residing in the home, or a resident of the home is pregnant, or the subject of the report is the parent, guardian, or person responsible for the welfare of another child regardless of whether that child resides in the home.

**SECTION 63‑7‑930.** Classification categories.

(A) Reports of child abuse and neglect must be classified in the department’s data system and records in one of three categories: Suspected, Unfounded, or Indicated. If the report is categorized as unfounded, the entry must further state the classification of unfounded reports as set forth in subsection (C). All initial reports must be considered suspected. Reports must be maintained in the category of suspected for no more than sixty days after the report was received by the department. By the end of the sixty‑day time period, suspected reports must be classified as either unfounded or indicated pursuant to the agency’s investigation.

(B)(1) Indicated findings must be based upon a finding of the facts available to the department that there is a preponderance of evidence that the child is an abused or neglected child. Indicated findings must include a description of the services being provided the child and those responsible for the child’s welfare and all relevant dispositional information.

(2) If the family court makes a determination or the process described in Subarticle 9 results in a determination that the indicated finding is not supported by a preponderance of evidence that there was any act of child abuse or neglect, the case classification must be converted to unfounded and Section 63‑7‑940 applies.

(3) If the family court makes a specific determination, or the process described in Subarticle 9 results in a determination that there is not a preponderance of evidence that the person who was the subject of the report committed an act of child abuse or neglect, but that the child was abused or neglected by an unknown person, the department must maintain the case as an indicated case and access to records of the case may be granted as provided in Section 63‑7‑1990. The department shall not delete from its data system or records information indicating that the person was the subject of the report. The department’s data system and records must clearly record the results of the court or administrative proceeding. If the case record and data system included a designation with the name of the subject of the report indicating that the person committed the abuse or neglect, that designation must be removed following the determination that there is not a preponderance of evidence that the subject of the report committed an act of child abuse or neglect.

(C) All reports that are not indicated at the conclusion of the investigation and all records of information for which an investigation was not conducted pursuant to Section 63‑7‑350 must be classified as unfounded. Unfounded reports must be further classified as Category I, Category II, Category III, or Category IV.

(1) Category I unfounded reports are those in which abuse and neglect were ruled out following the investigation. A report falls in this category if evidence of abuse or neglect as defined in this chapter was not found regardless of whether the family had other problems or was in need of services.

(2) Category II unfounded reports are those in which the investigation did not produce a preponderance of evidence that the child is an abused or neglected child.

(3) Category III unfounded reports are those in which an investigation could not be completed because the department was unable to locate the child or family or for some other compelling reason.

(4) Category IV unfounded reports are records of information received pursuant to Section 63‑7‑350, but which were not investigated by the department.

**SECTION 63‑7‑940.** Use of unfounded case information.

(A) Information concerning reports classified as unfounded contained in the statewide data system and records must be maintained for not less than five years after the finding. Information contained in unfounded cases is not subject to disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act as provided for in Chapter 4, Title 30. Access to and use of information contained in unfounded cases must be strictly limited to the following purposes and entities:

(1) a prosecutor or law enforcement officer or agency, for purposes of investigation of a suspected false report pursuant to Section 63‑7‑440;

(2) the department or a law enforcement officer or agency, for the purpose investigating allegations of abuse or neglect;

(3) the department or a law enforcement officer or agency, when information is received that allows the reopening of a Category III unfounded report pursuant to Section 63‑7‑920(A);

(4) as evidence in a court proceeding, if admissible under the rules of evidence as determined by a judge of competent jurisdiction;

(5) a person who is the subject of a report in an action brought by a prosecutor or by the department, if otherwise subject to discovery under the applicable rules of procedure;

(6) the department, for program improvement, auditing, and statistical purposes;

(7) as authorized in Section 63‑7‑2000; and

(8) the Department of Child Fatalities pursuant to Section 63‑11‑1960.

(B) Except as authorized in this section, no person may disseminate or permit dissemination of information maintained pursuant to subsection (A). A person who disseminates or permits dissemination in violation of this subsection is guilty of a misdemeanor and, upon conviction, must be fined not more than one thousand five hundred dollars or imprisoned not more than one year, or both. A person aggrieved by an unlawful dissemination in violation of this subsection may bring a civil action to recover damages incurred as a result of the unlawful act and to enjoin its dissemination or use.

**SECTION 63‑7‑950.** Withholding health care.

(A) Upon receipt of a report that a parent or other person responsible for the welfare of a child will not consent to health care needed by the child, the department shall investigate pursuant to Section 63‑7‑920. Upon a determination by a preponderance of evidence that adequate health care was withheld for religious reasons or other reasons reflecting an exercise of judgment by the parent or guardian as to the best interest of the child, the department may enter a finding that the child is in need of medical care and that the parent or other person responsible does not consent to medical care for religious reasons or other reasons reflecting an exercise of judgment as to the best interests of the child. The department may not enter a finding by a preponderance of evidence that the parent or other person responsible for the child has abused or neglected the child because of the withholding of medical treatment for religious reasons or for other reasons reflecting an exercise of judgment as to the best interests of the child. However, the department may petition the family court for an order finding that medical care is necessary to prevent death or permanent harm to the child. Upon a determination that a preponderance of evidence shows that the child might die or suffer permanent harm, the court may issue its order authorizing medical treatment without the consent of the parent or other person responsible for the welfare of the child. The department may move for emergency relief pursuant to family court rules when necessary for the health of the child.

(B) Proceedings brought under this section must be considered child abuse and neglect proceedings only for purposes of appointment of representation pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1620.

(C) This section does not authorize intervention if the child is under the care of a physician licensed under Chapter 47, Title 40, who supports the decision of the parent or guardian as a matter of reasonable medical judgment.

**SECTION 63‑7‑960.** Consolidation and delivery of services.

The department is charged with providing, directing, or coordinating the appropriate and timely delivery of services to children found to be abused or neglected and those responsible for their welfare or others exercising temporary or permanent control over these children. Services must not be construed to include emergency protective custody provided for in Subarticle 3.

**SECTION 63‑7‑970.** Children of incarcerated women.

The local office of the department responsible for the county of the mother’s legal residence must provide, direct, or coordinate the appropriate and timely delivery of services to children born of incarcerated mothers where no provision has been made for placement of the child outside the prison setting. Referral of these cases to the appropriate local office is the responsibility of the agency or institution having custody of the mother.

**SECTION 63‑7‑980.** Cooperation between DSS and law enforcement.

(A) The department must cooperate with law enforcement agencies within the area it serves and establish procedures necessary to facilitate the referral of child protection cases to the department.

(B)(1) Where the facts indicating abuse or neglect also appear to indicate a violation of criminal law, the department must notify the appropriate law enforcement agency of those facts within twenty‑four hours of the department’s finding for the purposes of police investigation. The law enforcement agency must file a formal incident report at the time it is notified by the department of the finding.

(2) When the intake report is of alleged sexual abuse, the department must notify the appropriate law enforcement agency within twenty‑four hours of receipt of the report to determine if a joint investigation is necessary. The law enforcement agency must file a formal incident report at the time it is notified of the alleged sexual abuse.

(C) The law enforcement agency must provide to the department copies of incident reports generated in any case reported to law enforcement by the department and in any case in which the officer responsible for the case knows the department is involved with the family or the child. The law enforcement officer must make reasonable efforts to advise the department of significant developments in the case, such as disposition in summary court, referral of a juvenile to the Department of Juvenile Justice, arrest or detention, trial date, and disposition of charges.

(D) The department must include in its records copies of incident reports provided under this section and must record the disposition of charges.

**SECTION 63‑7‑990.** Access to sex offender registry.

Notwithstanding any other provision of law, upon request of the department, a criminal justice agency having custody of or access to state or local law enforcement records or county sex offender registries shall provide the department with information pertaining to the criminal history of an adult residing in the home of a child who is named in a report of suspected child abuse or neglect or in a home in which it is proposed that the child be placed. This information shall include conviction data, nonconviction data, arrests, and incident reports accessible to the agency. The department shall not be charged a fee for this service.

SUBARTICLE 7.

 INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE AND NEGLECT

**SECTION 63‑7‑1210.** DSS investigation of institutional abuse.

(A) The Department of Social Services is authorized to receive and investigate reports of abuse and neglect of children who reside in or receive care or supervision in residential institutions, foster homes, and childcare facilities. Responsibility for investigating these entities must be assigned to a unit or units not responsible for selecting or licensing these entities. In no case does the Department of Social Services have responsibility for investigating allegations of abuse and neglect in institutions operated by the Department of Social Services.

(B) Foster homes subject to this section are those which are supervised by or recommended for licensing by the department or by child placing agencies. Indicated reports must be based upon a finding that abuse or neglect is supported by a preponderance of the evidence available to the department.

(C) The Department of Social Services may initiate proceedings in the circuit court to enjoin the operations of a foster home, an institution, or a child placing agency or to require other corrective action if necessary for the safety of the children. The department shall take whatever steps it considers necessary to inform potential reporters of abuse and neglect of its responsibilities under this section.

(D) The Department of Social Services must investigate an allegation of abuse or neglect of a child where the child is in the custody of or a resident of a residential treatment facility or intermediate care facility for the mentally retarded licensed by the Department of Health and Environmental Control or operated by the Department of Mental Health.

(E) The Department of Social Services has access to facilities for the purpose of conducting investigations and has authority to request and receive written statements, documents, exhibits, and other information pertinent to an investigation including, but not limited to, hospital records. The appropriate officials, agencies, departments, and political subdivisions of the State must assist and cooperate with the court and the Department of Social Services in furtherance of the purposes of this section.

(F) The Department of Social Services may file with the family court an affidavit and a petition to support issuance of a warrant at any time during an investigation. The family court must issue the warrant if the affidavit and petition establish probable cause to believe the child is an abused or neglected child and that the investigation cannot be completed without issuance of the warrant. The warrant may authorize the department to interview the child, to inspect the premises of the child, to inspect the premise where the child may be located or may reside, and to obtain copies of medical, school, or other records necessary for investigation of the allegations of abuse or neglect.

(G) The department shall promulgate regulations consistent with this authority. The regulations shall cover at a minimum investigation of reports, notice to the institutions and sponsoring agencies, and remedial action.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1220.** SLED investigation of DJJ and DSS institutional abuse cases.

The State Law Enforcement Division is authorized to receive and investigate reports of institutional abuse and neglect alleged to have occurred in any institution or foster home operated by the Department of Juvenile Justice and any institution or childcare facility operated by the Department of Social Services. The State Law Enforcement Division may promulgate regulations consistent with this authority to investigate these reports and take remedial action, if necessary.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1230.** Founded cases immediately entered into Central Registry.

When the investigation performed pursuant to this subarticle results in a determination that an individual has harmed a child or threatened a child with harm, as defined in Section 63‑7‑20, the name of that individual must be entered immediately in the Central Registry of Child Abuse and Neglect. The department must notify the individual in writing by certified mail that his name has been entered in the registry, of his right to request an appeal of the decision to enter his name in the registry, and of the possible ramifications regarding future employment and licensing if he allows his name to remain in the registry. The procedures set forth in Subarticle 9 apply when an individual challenges the entry of his name in the registry and challenges of the entry in the registry pursuant to this section must be given expedited review in the appellate process.

SUBARTICLE 9.

 ADMINISTRATIVE APPEAL OF INDICATED CASES

**SECTION 63‑7‑1410.** Purpose.

The purpose of this subarticle is to provide a child protective services appeals process for reports that have been indicated pursuant to Subarticles 5 and 13 and are not being brought before the family court for disposition and for reports indicated and entered in the Central Registry pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1230 and not being brought before the family court for disposition. The appeals hearing must be scheduled and conducted in accordance with the department’s fair hearing regulations. This process is available only to the person determined to have abused or neglected the child.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1420.** Judicial determinations appeals.

If a person requests an appeal under this subarticle and the family court has determined that the person is responsible for abuse or neglect of the child, an appeal pursuant to this subarticle is not available. If the family court reaches such a determination after the initiation of the appeal provided for in this subarticle, the department shall terminate the appeal upon receipt of an order that disposes of the issue. If a proceeding is pending in the family court that may result in a finding that will dispose of an appeal under this subarticle, the department shall stay the appeal pending the court’s decision.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1430.** Notice and opportunity to be heard.

(A) If the department determines that a report of suspected child abuse or neglect is indicated and the department is not taking the case to the family court for disposition, or if the case was entered in the Central Registry pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1230 and the department is not taking the case to family court for disposition, the department shall provide notice of the case decision by certified mail to the person determined to have abused or neglected the child. The notice must inform the person of the right to appeal the case decision and that, if he intends to appeal the decision, he must notify the department of his intent in writing within thirty days of receipt of the notice. The notice also must advise the person that the appeal process is for the purpose of determining whether a preponderance of evidence supports the case decision that the person abused or neglected the child. If the person does not notify the department of his intent to appeal in writing within thirty days of receipt of the notice, the right to appeal is waived by the person and the case decision becomes final.

(B) Within fourteen days after receipt of a notice of intent to appeal, an appropriate official of the department designated by the director must conduct an interim review of case documentation and the case determination. The interim review may not delay the scheduling of the contested case hearing. If the official conducting the interim review decides that the determination against the appellant is not supported by a preponderance of evidence, this decision must be reflected in the department’s case record and database as provided in Section 63‑7‑930(B)(2) or (3). If the person’s name was in the Central Registry as a result of a determination pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1230 and the interim review results in a reversal of the decision that supports that entry, the person’s name must be removed from the Central Registry.

(C) The state director shall appoint a hearing officer to conduct a contested case hearing for each case decision appealed. The hearing officer shall prepare recommended findings of fact and conclusions of law for review by the state director or the state director’s designee who shall render the final decision. The designee under this subsection must not be a person who was involved in making the original case decision or who conducted the interim review of the original case decision. The purpose of the hearing is to determine whether there is a preponderance of evidence that the appellant was responsible for abuse or neglect of the child.

(D) After a contested case hearing, if the state director or the director’s designee decides that the determination against the appellant is not supported by a preponderance of evidence, this decision must be reflected in the department’s case record and database as provided in Section 63‑7‑930(B)(2) or (3). If the person’s name was in the Central Registry as a result of a determination pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1230 and the state director or the director’s designee reverses the decision that supports that entry, the person’s name must be removed from the Central Registry. If the state director or the director’s designee affirms the determination against the appellant, the appellant has the right to seek judicial review in the family court of the jurisdiction in which the case originated.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1440.** Judicial review.

An appellant seeking judicial review shall file a petition in the family court within thirty days after the final decision of the department. The appellant shall serve a copy of the petition upon the department. The family court shall conduct a judicial review in accordance with the standards of review provided for in Section 1‑23‑380. The court may enter judgment upon the pleadings and a certified transcript of the record which must include the evidence upon which the findings and decisions appealed are based. The judgment must include a determination of whether the decision of the department that a preponderance of evidence shows that the appellant abused or neglected the child should be affirmed or reversed. The appellant is not entitled to a trial de novo in the family court.

SUBARTICLE 11.

 JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS

**SECTION 63‑7‑1610.** Jurisdiction and venue.

(A) The family court has exclusive jurisdiction over all proceedings held pursuant to this article.

(B) The county in which the child resides is the legal place of venue.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1620.** Legal representation of children.

In all child abuse and neglect proceedings:

(1) Children must be appointed legal counsel and a guardian ad litem by the family court. In the event the individual appointed as the guardian ad litem is an attorney guardian ad litem, the appointed individual shall serve as the guardian ad litem and legal counsel. The court must not, absent extraordinary circumstances, appoint additional legal counsel to represent an attorney guardian ad litem. The appointed attorney guardian ad litem must petition the family court for the appointment of legal counsel and set forth the extraordinary circumstances necessitating the appointment. Counsel for the child in no case may be the same as counsel for the parent, guardian, or other person subject to the proceeding or any governmental or social agency involved in the proceeding.

(2) Parents, guardians, or other persons subject to any judicial proceeding are entitled to legal counsel. Those persons unable to afford legal representation must be appointed counsel by the family court.

(3) The interests of the State and the Department of Social Services must be represented by the legal representatives of the Department of Social Services in any judicial proceeding.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1630.** Notice of hearings.

The department shall provide notice of a hearing held in connection with an action filed or pursued under Subarticle 3 or Section 63‑7‑1650, 63‑7‑1660, 63‑7‑1670, 63‑7‑1680, 63‑7‑1700, or 63‑7‑2550 to the foster parent, the preadoptive parent, or the relative who is providing care for a child. The notice must be in writing and may be delivered in person or by regular mail. The notice shall inform the foster parent, preadoptive parent, or relative of the date, place, and time of the hearing and of the right to attend the hearing and to address the court concerning the child. Notice provided pursuant to this section does not confer on the foster parent, preadoptive parent, or relative the status of a party to the action.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1640.** Family preservation.

(A) When this chapter requires the department to make reasonable efforts to preserve or reunify a family and requires the family court to determine whether these reasonable efforts have been made, the child’s health and safety must be the paramount concern.

(B) The family court may rule on whether reasonable efforts to preserve or reunify a family should be required in hearings regarding removal of custody, review of amendments to a placement plan, review of the status of a child in foster care, or permanency planning.

(C) The family court may authorize the department to terminate or forego reasonable efforts to preserve or reunify a family when the records of a court of competent jurisdiction show or when the family court determines that one or more of the following conditions exist:

(1) the parent has subjected the child to one or more of the following aggravated circumstances:

(a) severe or repeated abuse;

(b) severe or repeated neglect;

(c) sexual abuse;

(d) acts that the judge may find constitute torture; or

(e) abandonment;

(2) the parent has been convicted of or pled guilty or nolo contendere to murder of another child of the parent, or an equivalent offense, in this jurisdiction or another;

(3) the parent has been convicted of or pled guilty or nolo contendere to voluntary manslaughter of another child of the parent, or an equivalent offense, in this jurisdiction or another;

(4) the parent has been convicted of or pled guilty or nolo contendere to aiding, abetting, attempting, soliciting, or conspiring to commit murder or voluntary manslaughter pursuant to item (1), (2), or (3), or an equivalent offense, in this jurisdiction or another;

(5) physical abuse of a child of the parent resulted in the death or admission to the hospital for in‑patient care of that child and the abuse is the act for which the parent has been convicted of or pled guilty or nolo contendere to committing, aiding, abetting, conspiring to commit, or soliciting:

(a) an offense against the person as provided for in Title 16, Chapter 3;

(b) criminal domestic violence as defined in Section 16‑25‑20;

(c) criminal domestic violence of a high and aggravated nature as defined in Section 16‑25‑65; or

(d) the common law offense of assault and battery of a high and aggravated nature, or an equivalent offense in another jurisdiction;

(6) the parental rights of the parent to a sibling of the child have been terminated involuntarily;

(7) other circumstances exist that the court finds make continuation or implementation of reasonable efforts to preserve or reunify the family inconsistent with the permanent plan for the child.

(D) The department may proceed with efforts to place a child for adoption or with a legal guardian concurrently with making efforts to prevent removal or to make it possible for the child to return safely to the home.

(E) If the family court’s decision that reasonable efforts to preserve or reunify a family are not required results from a hearing other than a permanency planning hearing, the court’s order shall require that a permanency planning hearing be held within thirty days of the date of the order.

(F) In determining whether to authorize the department to terminate or forego reasonable efforts to preserve or reunify a family, the court must consider whether initiation or continuation of reasonable efforts to preserve or reunify the family is in the best interests of the child.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1650.** Services without removal.

(A) Upon investigation of a report under Section 63‑7‑920 or at any time during the delivery of services by the department, the department may petition the family court for authority to intervene and provide protective services without removal of custody if the department determines by a preponderance of evidence that the child is an abused or neglected child and that the child cannot be protected from harm without intervention.

(B) The petition shall contain a full description of the basis for the department’s belief that the child cannot be protected adequately without department intervention, including a description of the condition of the child, any previous efforts by the department to work with the parent or guardian, treatment programs which have been offered and proven inadequate, and the attitude of the parent or guardian towards intervention and protective services.

(C) Upon receipt of a petition under this section, the family court shall schedule a hearing to be held within thirty‑five days of the filing date to determine whether intervention is necessary.

(D) The parties to the petition must be served with a summons and notices of right to counsel and of the hearing date and time along with the petition. Personal jurisdiction over the parties is effected if they are served at least seventy‑two hours before the hearing. No responsive pleading to the petition is required. The court may authorize service by publication in appropriate cases and may waive the thirty‑five days requirement when necessary to achieve service. A party may waive service or appear voluntarily.

(E) Intervention and protective services must not be ordered unless the court finds that the allegations of the petition are supported by a preponderance of the evidence including a finding that the child is an abused or neglected child as defined in Section 63‑7‑20 and the child cannot be protected from further harm without intervention.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1660.** Services with removal.

(A) Upon investigation of a report received under Section 63‑7‑310 or at any time during the delivery of services by the department, the department may petition the family court to remove the child from custody of the parent, guardian, or other person legally responsible for the child’s welfare if the department determines by a preponderance of evidence that the child is an abused or neglected child and that the child cannot be safely maintained in the home in that he cannot be protected from unreasonable risk of harm affecting the child’s life, physical health, safety, or mental well‑being without removal. If a noncustodial parent is not named as a party in the removal petition, the agency shall exercise every reasonable effort to promptly notify the noncustodial parent that a removal proceeding has been initiated and of the date and time of any hearings scheduled pursuant to this section.

(B)(1) The petition shall contain a full description of the reasons why the child cannot be protected adequately in the custody of the parent or guardian, including facts supporting the department’s allegation that the child is an abused or neglected child as defined in Section 63‑7‑20 and that retention of the child in or return of the child to the home would place the child at unreasonable risk of harm affecting the child’s life, physical health or safety, or mental well‑being and the child cannot reasonably be protected from this harm without being removed, a description of the condition of the child, any previous efforts to work with the parent or guardian, in‑home treatment programs which have been offered and proven inadequate, and the attitude of the parent or guardian towards placement of the child in an alternative setting. The petition also shall contain a statement of the harms the child is likely to suffer as a result of removal and a description of the steps that will be taken to minimize the harm to the child that may result upon removal.

(2) The petition for removal may include a petition for termination of parental rights.

(C)(1) Whether or not the petition for removal includes a petition for termination of parental rights, the petition shall contain a notice informing the parents of the potential effect of the hearing on their parental rights and a notice to all interested parties that objections to the sufficiency of a placement plan, if ordered, or of any recommendations for provisions in the plan or court order must be raised at the hearing. The notice must be printed in boldface print or in all upper case letters and set off in a box.

(2) If the petition includes a petition for termination of parental rights, the notice shall state: “As a result of this hearing, you could lose your rights as a parent”.

(3) If the petition does not include a petition for termination of parental rights, the notice shall state: “At this hearing the court may order a treatment plan. If you fail to comply with the plan, you could lose your rights as a parent”.

(D) Upon receipt of a removal petition under this section, the family court shall schedule a hearing to be held within thirty‑five days of the date of receipt to determine whether removal is necessary. The parties to the petition must be served with a summons and notices of right to counsel and the hearing date and time along with the petition. Personal jurisdiction over the parties is effected if they are served at least seventy‑two hours before the hearing. No responsive pleading to the petition is required. The court may authorize service by publication in appropriate cases and may waive the thirty‑five days requirement when necessary to achieve service. A party may waive service or appear voluntarily.

(E) The court shall not order that a child be removed from the custody of the parent or guardian unless the court finds that the allegations of the petition are supported by a preponderance of evidence including a finding that the child is an abused or neglected child as defined in Section 63‑7‑20 and that retention of the child in or return of the child to the home would place the child at unreasonable risk of harm affecting the child’s life, physical health or safety, or mental well‑being and the child cannot reasonably be protected from this harm without being removed.

(F)(1) It is presumed that a newborn child is an abused or neglected child as defined in Section 63‑7‑20 and that the child cannot be protected from further harm without being removed from the custody of the mother upon proof that:

(a) a blood or urine test of the child at birth or a blood or urine test of the mother at birth shows the presence of any amount of a controlled substance or a metabolite of a controlled substance unless the presence of the substance or the metabolite is the result of medical treatment administered to the mother of the infant or the infant, or

(b) the child has a medical diagnosis of fetal alcohol syndrome; and

(c) a blood or urine test of another child of the mother or a blood or urine test of the mother at the birth of another child showed the presence of any amount of a controlled substance or a metabolite of a controlled substance unless the presence of the substance or the metabolite was the result of medical treatment administered to the mother of the infant or the infant, or

(d) another child of the mother has the medical diagnosis of fetal alcohol syndrome.

(2) This presumption may be rebutted by proof that the father or another adult who will assume the role of parent is available and suitable to provide care for the child in the home of the mother. The father or the other adult must be made a party to the action and subject to the court’s order establishing the conditions for maintaining the child in the mother’s home. This statutory presumption does not preclude the court from ordering removal of a child upon other proof of alcohol or drug abuse or addiction by the parent or person responsible for the child who has harmed the child or threatened the child with harm.

(G) If the court removes custody of the child, the court’s order shall contain a finding by the court of whether reasonable efforts were made by the department to prevent removal of the child and a finding of whether continuation of the child in the home would be contrary to the welfare of the child. The order shall state:

(1) the services made available to the family before the removal of the child and how they related to the needs of the family;

(2) the efforts of the agency to provide these services to the family before removal;

(3) why the efforts to provide services did not eliminate the need for removal; and

(4) whether the efforts to eliminate the need for removal were reasonable including, but not limited to, whether they were reasonably available and timely, reasonably adequate to address the needs of the family, reasonably adequate to protect the child and realistic under the circumstances. If the department’s first contact with the child occurred under such circumstances that reasonable services would not have allowed the child to remain safely in the home, the court shall find that removal of the child without services or without further services was reasonable.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1670.** Treatment plan.

(A) At the close of a hearing pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1650 or 63‑7‑1660 and upon a finding that the child shall remain in the home and that protective services shall continue, the family court shall review and approve a treatment plan designed to alleviate any danger to the child and to aid the parents so that the child will not be endangered in the future.

(B) The plan must be prepared by the department and shall detail any changes in parental behavior or home conditions that must be made and any services which will be provided to the family to ensure, to the greatest extent possible, that the child will not be endangered. Whenever possible, the plan must be prepared with the participation of the parents, the child, and any other agency or individual that will be required to provide services. The plan must be submitted to the court at the hearing. If any changes in the plan are ordered, the department shall submit a revised plan to the court within two weeks of the hearing, with copies to the parties and legal counsel. Any dispute regarding the plan must be resolved by the court. The terms of the plan must be included as part of the court order. The court order shall specify a date when treatment goals must be achieved and court jurisdiction ends, unless the court specifically finds that the matter must be brought back before the court for further review before the case may be closed. If the order requires further court review before case closure, the order shall specify a time limit for holding the next hearing.

(C)(1) Unless services are to terminate earlier, the department shall schedule a review hearing before the court at least once every twelve months to establish whether the conditions which required the initial intervention exist. If the conditions no longer exist, the court shall order termination of protective services, and the court’s jurisdiction shall end. If the court finds that the conditions which required the initial intervention are still present, it shall establish:

(a) what services have been offered to or provided to the parents;

(b) whether the parents are satisfied with the delivery of services;

(c) whether the department is satisfied with the cooperation given to the department by the parents;

(d) whether additional services should be ordered and additional treatment goals established; and

(e) the date when treatment goals must be achieved and court jurisdiction ends.

(2) The court order shall specify a date upon which jurisdiction will terminate automatically, which must be no later than eighteen months after the initial intervention. Jurisdiction may be extended pursuant to a hearing on motion by any party, if the court finds that there is clear and convincing evidence that the child is threatened with harm absent a continuation of services.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1680.** Approval or amendment of plan.

(A) If the court orders that a child be removed from the custody of the parent or guardian, the court must approve a placement plan. A plan must be presented to the court for its approval at the removal hearing or within ten days after the removal hearing. If the plan is presented subsequent to the removal hearing, the court shall hold a hearing on the plan if requested by a party. The plan must be a written document prepared by the department. To the extent possible, the plan must be prepared with the participation of the parents or guardian of the child, the child, and any other agency or individual that will be required to provide services in order to implement the plan.

(B) The placement plan shall include, but is not limited to:

(1) the specific reasons for removal of the child from the custody of the parent or guardian and the changes that must be made before the child may be returned, including:

(a) the nature of the harm or threatened harm that necessitated removal, a description of the problems or conditions in the home that caused the harm or threatened harm, and the reason why the child could not be protected without removal;

(b) the nature of the changes in the home and family situation that must be made in order to correct the problems and conditions that necessitated removal, time frames for accomplishing these objectives, and means for measuring whether the objectives have been accomplished. The objectives stated in this part of the plan must relate to problems and circumstances serious enough to justify removal. The plan must be oriented to correcting these problems and circumstances in the shortest possible time in order to expedite the child’s return to the home;

(c) specific actions to be taken by the parents or guardian of the child to accomplish the objectives identified in subitem (b) and time frames for taking these actions;

(2) other conditions in the home that warrant state intervention, but would not alone have been sufficient to warrant removal, and the changes that must be made in order to terminate intervention, including:

(a) the nature of the harm or threatened harm that justifies state intervention and a description of the problems or conditions of the home that caused the harm or threatened harm;

(b) the nature of the changes in the home and family situation that must be made in order to correct the problems and conditions that caused the harm or threatened harm, time frames for accomplishing these objectives, and means for measuring whether the objectives have been accomplished;

(c) specific actions to be taken by the parents or guardian of the child to accomplish the objectives identified in subitem (b) and time frames for taking these actions;

(3) the social and other services to be provided or made available to the parents, guardian, or other relevant adult to assist the parents or guardian in accomplishing the objectives, including a specific finding as to the minimum number and frequency of contacts a caseworker with the department must have with the child while in foster care. For a child placed in foster care within this State, the caseworker must meet with the child, at a minimum, once a month, but based upon the particular needs and circumstances of the individual child, more frequent contacts may be ordered by the court;

(4) the financial responsibilities and obligations, if any, of the parents or guardian for the support of the child during the placement;

(5) the visitation rights and obligations of the parents, guardian, siblings, or other relatives of the child during the placement. The plan shall provide for as much contact as is reasonably possible and consistent with the best interests of the child between the child and the child’s parents, guardian, siblings, and other appropriate relatives with whom the child has a close relationship including visitation and participation of the parents or guardian in the care of the child while the child is in placement;

(6) the nature and location of the placement of the child unless it is determined that disclosure of the location of the placement to the parents, guardian, or any other person would be contrary to the best interest of the child. In making its determination of whether disclosure of the location of the placement is in the best interest of the child, the department must consider evidence of sexual abuse, physical abuse, or substance abuse by an adult living in the child’s home or evidence of criminal domestic violence in the child’s home. When disclosure of the location of the placement is determined to be contrary to the best interest of the child, disclosure must not be made to the abusing party or to any member of the abusing party’s household. The placement must be as close to the child’s home as is reasonably possible, unless placement at a greater distance is necessary to promote the child’s well‑being. In the absence of good cause to the contrary, preference must be given to placement with a relative or other person who is known to the child and has a constructive and caring relationship with the child;

(7) the social and other supportive services to be provided to the child and the foster parents including counseling or other services to assist the child in dealing with the effects of separation from the child’s home and family;

(8) if the parents or guardian were not involved in the development of the plan, the nature of the agency’s efforts to secure parental participation;

(9) notice to the parents or guardians that failure to substantially accomplish the objectives stated in the plan within the time frames provided may result in termination of parental rights, subject to notice and a hearing as provided in Article 7.

(C) The placement plan clearly shall state the conditions necessary to bring about return of the child and the reasonable efforts that will be made by the department to reunite the child with the child’s family. “Reasonable efforts” include location of the placement and visitation arrangements as well as services to the parents or guardian and the child.

(D) The court shall approve the plan only if it finds that:

(1) the plan is consistent with the court’s order placing the child in the custody of the department;

(2) the plan is consistent with the requirements for the content of a placement plan set forth in subsection (B);

(3) if the parents or guardian of the child did not participate in the development of the plan, that the department made reasonable efforts to secure their participation; and

(4) the plan is meaningful and designed to address facts and circumstances upon which the court based the order of removal.

If the court determines that any of these criteria are not satisfied, the court shall require that necessary amendments to the plan be submitted to the court within a specified time but no later than seven days. A hearing on the amended plan must be held if requested by a party.

(E) The court shall include in its order and shall advise defendants on the record that failure to substantially accomplish the objectives stated in the plan within the time frames provided may result in termination of parental rights, subject to notice and a hearing as provided in Article 7.

(F) The department immediately shall give a copy of the plan to the parents or guardian of the child, and any other parties identified by the court including the child if the court considers it appropriate. If a copy of the plan is not given to the child, the department shall provide the child with age‑appropriate information concerning the substance of the plan unless the court finds that disclosure of any part of the plan to the child would be inconsistent with the child’s best interests. A copy of any part of the plan that directly pertains to the foster family or the foster child must be provided to the foster parents.

(G) The plan may be amended at any time if all parties agree regarding the revisions, and the revisions are approved by the court. The amended plan must be submitted to the court with a written explanation for the proposed change. The plan also may be amended by the court upon motion of a party after a hearing based on evidence demonstrating the need for the amendment. A copy of the amended plan immediately must be given to the parties specified in subsection (F). Any additions to the elements set forth in subsections (B)(1)(b) and (c) must relate to problems or conditions that are serious enough to justify removal of the child from the home based on the criteria in Section 63‑7‑1660(E).

(H) Any objections to the sufficiency of a plan or the process by which a plan was developed must be made at the hearing on the plan. Failure to request a hearing or to enter an objection at the hearing constitutes a waiver of the objection. The sufficiency of the plan or of the process for developing the plan may not be raised as an issue in a proceeding for termination of parental rights under Article 7.

(I) Upon petition of a party in interest, the court may order the state or county director or other authorized representative of the department to show cause why the agency should not be required to provide services in accordance with the plan. The provisions of the plan must be incorporated as part of a court order issued pursuant to this section. A person who fails to comply with an order may be held in contempt and subject to appropriate sanctions imposed by the court.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1690.** Placement plans; substance abuse issues.

(A) When the conditions justifying removal pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1660 include the addiction of the parent or abuse by the parent of controlled substances, the court may require as part of the placement plan ordered pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1680:

(1) the parent successfully must complete a treatment program operated by the Department of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Services or another treatment program approved by the department before return of the child to the home;

(2) any other adult person living in the home who has been determined by the court to be addicted to or abusing controlled substances or alcohol and whose conduct has contributed to the parent’s addiction or abuse of controlled substances or alcohol successfully must complete a treatment program approved by the department before return of the child to the home; and

(3) the parent or other adult, or both, identified in item (2) must submit to random testing for substance abuse and must be alcohol or drug free for a period of time to be determined by the court before return of the child. The parent or other adult identified in item (2) must continue random testing for substance abuse and must be alcohol or drug free for a period of time to be determined by the court after return of the child before the case will be authorized closed.

(B) Results of tests ordered pursuant to this section must be submitted to the department and are admissible only in family court proceedings brought by the department.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1700.** Permanency planning.

(A) The family court shall review the status of a child placed in foster care upon motion filed by the department to determine a permanent plan for the child. The permanency planning hearing must be held no later than one year after the date the child was first placed in foster care. At the initial permanency planning hearing, the court shall review the status of the child and the progress being made toward the child’s return home or toward any other permanent plan approved at the removal hearing. The court’s order shall make specific findings in accordance with this section. An action for permanency planning must be brought for a child who enters the custody of the department by any mechanism, including Subarticle 3 or Section 63‑7‑1660 or 63‑9‑330. If the child enters the custody of the department pursuant to Section 63‑9‑330 and no action is pending in the family court concerning the child, the department may initiate the permanency planning hearing with a summons and petition for review. All parties must be served with the motion or the summons and petition at least ten days before the hearing, and no responsive pleading is required.

(B) The department shall attach a supplemental report to the motion or other pleadings which must contain at least:

(1) that information necessary to support findings required in subsection (H);

(2) the recommended permanent plan and suggested timetable for attaining permanence; and

(3) any reports of the local foster care review board which pertain to the child.

The department may use the same form for the supplemental report, reports from the department to the local foster care review board, and reports compiled for internal department reviews.

(C) At the permanency planning hearing, the court shall review the department’s plan for achieving permanence for the child. If the department’s plan is not reunification with the parents, custody or guardianship with a fit and willing relative, or termination of parental rights, the department must show compelling reasons for the selection of another permanent plan. If the court approves a plan that is not reunification with the parents, custody or guardianship with a fit and willing relative, or termination of parental rights, the court must find compelling reasons for approval of the plan and that the plan is in the child’s best interests.

(D) If the court determines at the permanency planning hearing that the child may be safely maintained in the home in that the return of the child to the child’s parent would not cause an unreasonable risk of harm to the child’s life, physical health, safety, or mental well‑being, the court shall order the child returned to the child’s parent. The court may order a specified period of supervision and services not to exceed twelve months. When determining whether the child should be returned, the court shall consider all evidence and the supplemental report including whether the parent has substantially complied with the terms and conditions of the plan approved pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1680.

(E) Unless subsection (C), (F), or (G) applies, if the court determines at the permanency planning hearing that the child should not be returned to the child’s parent at that time, the court’s order shall require the department to file a petition to terminate parental rights to the child not later than sixty days after receipt of the order. If a petition to terminate parental rights is to be filed, the department shall exercise and document every reasonable effort to promote and expedite the adoptive placement and adoption of the child, including a thorough adoption assessment and child‑specific recruitment. Adoptive placements must be diligently sought for the child and failure to do so solely because a child is classified as “special needs” is expressly prohibited. An adoption may not be delayed or denied solely on these special needs. For purposes of this subsection:

(1) “thorough adoption assessment” means conducting and documenting face‑to‑face interviews with the child, foster care providers, and other significant parties; and

(2) “child specific recruitment” means recruiting an adoptive placement targeted to meet the individual needs of the specific child including, but not be limited to, use of the media, use of photo listings, and any other in‑state or out‑of‑state resources which may be utilized to meet the specific needs of the child, unless there are extenuating circumstances that indicate that these efforts are not in the best interest of the child.

(F) If the court determines that the criteria in subsection (D) are not met but that the child may be returned to the parent within a specified reasonable time not to exceed eighteen months after the child was placed in foster care, the court may order an extension of the plan approved pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1680 or may order compliance with a modified plan. Before continuing foster care for this purpose, the court must find that, at the time of the hearing, initiation of termination of parental rights is not in the best interests of the child and that the best interests of the child will be served by the extended or modified plan.

(G) If after assessing the viability of adoption, the department demonstrates that termination of parental rights is not in the child’s best interests, and if the court finds that the best interests of the child would be served, the court may award custody or legal guardianship, or both, to a suitable, fit, and willing relative or nonrelative; however, a home study on the individual whom the department is recommending for custody of the child must be submitted to the court for consideration before custody of legal guardianship, or both, are awarded. The court may order a specified period of supervision and services not to exceed twelve months, and the court may authorize a period of visitation or trial placement prior to receiving a home study.

(H) If at the initial permanency planning hearing the court does not order return of the child pursuant to subsection (D), in addition to those findings supporting the selection of a different plan, the court shall specify in its order:

(1) what services have been provided to or offered to the parents to facilitate reunification;

(2) the compliance or lack of compliance by all parties to the plan approved pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1680;

(3) the extent to which the parents have visited or supported the child and any reasons why visitation or support has not occurred or has been infrequent;

(4) whether previous services should continue and whether additional services are needed to facilitate reunification, identifying the services, and specifying the expected date for completion, which must be no longer than eighteen months from the date the child was placed in foster care;

(5) whether return of the child can be expected and identification of the changes the parent must make in circumstances, conditions, or behavior to remedy the causes of the child’s placement or retention in foster care;

(6) whether the child’s foster care is to continue for a specified time and, if so, how long;

(7) if the child has attained the age of sixteen, the services needed to assist the child to make the transition to independent living;

(8) whether the child’s current placement is safe and appropriate;

(9) whether the department has made reasonable efforts to assist the parents in remedying the causes of the child’s placement or retention in foster care; and

(10) the steps the department is taking to promote and expedite the adoptive placement and to finalize the adoption of the child, including documentation of child specific recruitment efforts.

(I) If after the permanency planning hearing, the child is retained in foster care, future permanency planning hearings must be held as follows:

(1) If the child is retained in foster care and the agency is required to initiate termination of parental rights proceedings, the termination of parental rights hearing may serve as the next permanency planning hearing, but only if it is held no later than one year from the date of the previous permanency planning hearing.

(2) If the court ordered extended foster care for the purpose of reunification with the parent, the court must select a permanent plan for the child other than another extension for reunification purposes at the next permanency planning hearing. The hearing must be held on or before the date specified in the plan for expected completion of the plan; in no case may the hearing be held any later than six months from the date of the last court order.

(3) After the termination of parental rights hearing, the requirements of Section 63‑7‑2580 must be met. Permanency planning hearings must be held annually, starting with the date of the termination of parental rights hearing. No further permanency planning hearings may be required after filing a decree of adoption of the child.

(4) If the court places custody or guardianship with the parent, extended family member, or suitable nonrelative and a period of services and supervision is authorized, services and supervision automatically terminate on the date specified in the court order. Before the termination date, the department or the guardian ad litem may file a petition with the court for a review hearing on the status of the placement. Filing of the petition stays termination of the case until further order from the court. If the court finds clear and convincing evidence that the child will be threatened with harm if services and supervision do not continue, the court may extend the period of services and supervision for a specified time. The court’s order must specify the services and supervision necessary to reduce or eliminate the risk of harm to the child.

(5) If the child is retained in foster care pursuant to a plan other than one described in items (1) through (4), future permanency planning hearings must be held at least annually.

(J) A supplemental report must be attached to a motion filed pursuant to subsection (A). The supplemental report and notice of the hearing must be served upon all named parties at least ten days before the hearing.

(K) A named party, the child’s guardian ad litem, or the local foster care review board may file a motion for review of the case at any time. Any other party in interest may move to intervene in the case pursuant to the rules of civil procedure and if the motion is granted, may move for review. Parties in interest include, but are not limited to, the individual or agency with legal custody or placement of the child and the foster parent. The notice of motion and motion for review must be served on the named parties at least ten days before the hearing date. The motion shall state the reason for review of the case and the relief requested.

(L) The pendency of an appeal concerning a child in foster care does not deprive the court of jurisdiction to hear a case pursuant to this section. The court shall retain jurisdiction to review the status of the child and may act on matters not affected by the appeal.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1710.** Standards for terminating parental rights.

(A) When a child is in the custody of the department, the department shall file a petition to terminate parental rights or shall join as party in a termination petition filed by another party if:

(1) a child has been in foster care under the responsibility of the State for fifteen of the most recent twenty‑two months;

(2) a court of competent jurisdiction has determined the child to be an abandoned infant;

(3) a court of competent jurisdiction has determined that the parent has committed murder of another child of the parent or has committed voluntary manslaughter or another child of the parent;

(4) a court of competent jurisdiction has determined that the parent has aided, abetted, conspired, or solicited to commit murder or voluntary manslaughter of another child of the parent; or

(5) a court of competent jurisdiction has determined that the parent has committed a felony assault that has resulted in serious bodily injury to the child or to another child of the parent.

(B) Concurrently with filing of the petition, the department shall seek to identify, recruit, process, and approve a qualified family for adoption of the child if an adoptive family has not yet been selected and approved.

(C) This section does not apply:

(1) to a child for whom the family court has found that initiation of termination of parental rights is not in the best interests of the child, after applying the criteria of Section 63‑7‑1700(C), (D), (F), or (G) and entering the findings required to select a permanent plan for the child from Section 63‑7‑1700(C), (D), (F), or (G). For this exemption to apply, the court must find that there are compelling reasons for selection of a permanent plan other than termination of parental rights;

(2) if the family court finds that the department has not afforded services to the parents provided for in the treatment plan approved pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1680 in a manner that was consistent with the time periods in the plan or that court hearings have been delayed in such a way as to interfere with the initiation, delivery, or completion of services, but only if:

(a) the parent did not delay the court proceedings without cause or delay or refuse the services;

(b) successful completion of the services in question may allow the child to be returned as provided for in Section 63‑7‑1700(F) within the extension period; and

(c) the case is not one for which the court has made a determination that reasonable efforts to preserve or reunify the family are not necessary pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1640.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1720.** Clerk of Court and court administration progress reports.

(A) Beginning on January 1, 2000, or on the date of compliance with subsection (D), whichever is later, and on the first day of each month thereafter, each county clerk of court must make a report to Court Administration concerning each child protection case pending in family court in which a permanency planning order has not been filed. The report must include the case caption, the filing date, and, if applicable, the date of the permanency planning hearing and the permanency planning order. The clerk is not required to make a report concerning a case after a permanency planning order has been filed in the case.

(B) Court Administration must provide the administrative judge of the family court of each circuit with the information reported concerning cases pending in the circuit.

(C) On August fifteenth of each year, the Director of Court Administration must file with the Chief Justice of the South Carolina Supreme Court, with copies to the Department of Social Services and the Governor, a written report summarizing the information reported by the clerks of court pursuant to this section. The report shall contain, at a minimum, the following information summarized by county, by circuit, and by state:

(1) the number of new cases brought by the department during the preceding twelve months; and

(2) the number of cases filed more than twelve months in which a permanency planning order has not been filed.

The annual report must contain an analysis of the progress of these cases through the family court, identify impediments to complying with statutory mandates, and make recommendations for improving compliance.

(D) No later than January 1, 2000, Court Administration must institute the use of a separate code to identify child protection cases in its data systems. However, if the Chief Justice, upon recommendation of Court Administration, determines that there is a compelling reason why it is not feasible to institute the use of a separate code by January 1, 2000, compliance with this subsection may be deferred for up to twelve months, as necessary, for making adjustments in the data systems. The date of compliance and the compelling reason for any delay beyond January 1, 2000, shall be included in the report required by subsection (E).

(E) Court Administration shall conduct a study of the feasibility of collecting additional data necessary to monitor and ensure compliance with statutory time frames for conducting hearings in department cases, and no later than July 1, 2000, shall submit a report to the Chief Justice, with copies to the Department of Social Services and the Governor, containing recommendations for instituting the necessary data collection system.

SUBARTICLE 13.

 CENTRAL REGISTRY OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT RECORDS AND REPORTS

**SECTION 63‑7‑1910.** Purpose.

The purpose of this subarticle is to establish a system for the identification of abused and neglected children and those who are responsible for their welfare, to provide a system for the coordination of reports concerning abused and neglected children, and to provide data for determining the incidence and prevalence of child abuse and neglect in this State. To further these purposes, the department must maintain one or more statewide data systems concerning cases reported to it pursuant to this article.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1920.** DSS to maintain Central Registry.

(A) The Department of Social Services must maintain a Central Registry of Child Abuse and Neglect within the department’s child protective services unit in accordance with this subarticle and Subarticles 5 and 7 and Section 17‑25‑135. Perpetrators of child abuse and neglect must be entered in the registry only by order of a court as provided for in this subarticle and Section 17‑25‑135, or as provided for in Section 63‑7‑1230. Each entry in the registry must be accompanied by information further identifying the person including, but not limited to, the person’s date of birth, address, and any other identifying characteristics, and describing the abuse or neglect committed by the person.

(B) The Central Registry of Child Abuse and Neglect must not contain information from reports classified as unfounded. Other department records and databases must treat unfounded cases as provided for in Section 63‑7‑930.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1930.** Petition for placement in Central Registry.

(A) At any time following receipt of a report, the department may petition the family court for an order directing that the person named as perpetrator be entered in the Central Registry of Child Abuse and Neglect. The petition must have attached a written case summary stating facts sufficient to establish by a preponderance of evidence that the person named as perpetrator abused or neglected the child and that the nature and circumstances of the abuse indicate that the person named as perpetrator would present a significant risk of committing physical or sexual abuse or wilful or reckless neglect if placed in a position or setting outside of the person’s home that involves care of or substantial contact with children. The department must serve a copy of the petition and summary on the person named as perpetrator. The petition must include a statement that the judge must rule based on the facts stated in the petition unless the clerk of court or the clerk’s designee receives a written request for a hearing from the person named as perpetrator within five days after service of the petition. The name, address, and telephone number of the clerk of court or the clerk’s designee must be stated in the petition. If the person named as perpetrator requests a hearing, the court must schedule a hearing on the merits of the allegations in the petition and summary to be held no later than five working days following the request.

(B) The department must seek an order placing a person in the Central Registry pursuant to subsection (A) in all cases in which the department concludes that there is a preponderance of evidence that the person committed sexual abuse.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1940.** Court order for placement in Central Registry.

(A) At a hearing pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1650 or 63‑7‑1660, at which the court orders that a child be taken or retained in custody or finds that the child was abused or neglected, the court:

(1) must order that a person’s name be entered in the Central Registry of Child Abuse and Neglect if the court finds that there is a preponderance of evidence that the person physically or sexually abused or wilfully or recklessly neglected the child. Placement on the Central Registry cannot be waived by any party or by the court. However, if the only form of physical abuse that is found by the court is excessive corporal punishment, the court only may order that the person’s name be entered in the Central Registry if item (2) applies;

(2) may, except as provided for in item (1), order that the person’s name be entered in the Central Registry if the court finds by a preponderance of evidence:

(a) that the person abused or neglected the child in any manner, including the use of excessive corporal punishment; and

(b) that the nature and circumstances of the abuse indicate that the person would present a significant risk of committing physical or sexual abuse or wilful or reckless neglect if the person were in a position or setting outside of the person’s home that involves care of or substantial contact with children.

(B) At the probable cause hearing, the court may order that the person be entered in the Central Registry if there is sufficient evidence to support the findings required by subsection (A).

**SECTION 63‑7‑1950.** Updated records requested.

In cases where a person has been placed in the Central Registry of Child Abuse and Neglect, the outcome of any further proceedings must be entered immediately by the department into the Central Registry of Child Abuse and Neglect. If it is determined that a report is unfounded, the department must immediately purge information identifying that person as a perpetrator from the registry and from department records as provided in Sections 63‑7‑1920 and 63‑7‑1960.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1960.** Destruction of certain records.

The names, addresses, birth dates, identifying characteristics, and other information unnecessary for auditing and statistical purposes of persons named in department records of indicated cases other than the Central Registry of Child Abuse and Neglect must be destroyed seven years from the date services are terminated. This section does not prohibit the department from maintaining an “indicated case” which contains identifying information on the child who is the subject of the indicated report and those responsible for the child’s welfare without identifying a person as perpetrator, and it does not prohibit the department from providing child protective services to the child who is the subject of an indicated report and those responsible for the child’s welfare.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1970.** Release of information.

Information in the central registry and other department records may be released only as authorized in Section 63‑7‑1990 or as otherwise specifically authorized by statute. Information in records of the department other than the Central Registry of Child Abuse and Neglect must not be used for screening potential employees or volunteers of any public or private entity, except as specifically provided by Section 63‑7‑1990 or as otherwise provided by statute. However, nothing in this section prevents the department from using other information in its records when making decisions associated with administration or delivery of the department’s programs and services.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1980.** Screening against the Central Registry.

(A) When a statute or regulation makes determination of a person’s history of child abuse or neglect a condition for employment or volunteer service in a facility or other entity regulated by the department, the person must be screened against the Central Registry of Child Abuse and Neglect before employment or service in the volunteer role. The person must be screened each time the license, registration, or other operating approval of the facility or other entity is renewed.

(B) When a statute or regulation makes determination of an applicant’s history of child abuse or neglect, a condition for issuance of a license, registration, or other operating approval by the department, the applicant must be screened against the Central Registry of Child Abuse and Neglect before issuance of the initial license, registration, or other approval and each time the license, registration, or other operating approval is renewed.

**SECTION 63‑7‑1990.** Confidentiality and release of records and information.

(A) All reports made and information collected pursuant to this article maintained by the Department of Social Services and the Central Registry of Child Abuse and Neglect are confidential. A person who disseminates or permits the dissemination of these records and the information contained in these records except as authorized in this section, is guilty of a misdemeanor and, upon conviction, must be fined not more than one thousand five hundred dollars or imprisoned not more than one year, or both.

(B) The department is authorized to grant access to the records of indicated cases to the following persons, agencies, or entities:

(1) the ombudsman of the office of the Governor or the Governor’s designee;

(2) a person appointed as the child’s guardian ad litem, the attorney for the child’s guardian ad litem, or the child’s attorney;

(3) appropriate staff of the department;

(4) a law enforcement agency investigating or prosecuting known or suspected abuse or neglect of a child or any other crime against a child, attempting to locate a missing child, investigating or prosecuting the death of a child, or investigating or prosecuting any other crime established in or associated with activities authorized under this article;

(5) a person who is named in a report or investigation pursuant to this article as having abused or neglected a child, that person’s attorney, and that person’s guardian ad litem;

(6) a child fourteen years of age or older who is named in a report as a victim of child abuse or neglect, except in regard to information that the department may determine to be detrimental to the emotional well‑being of the child;

(7) the parents or guardians of a child who is named in a report as a victim of child abuse or neglect;

(8) county medical examiners or coroners who are investigating the death of a child;

(9) the State Child Fatality Advisory Committee and the Department of Child Fatalities in accordance with the exercise of their purposes or duties pursuant to Article 19, Chapter 11;

(10) family courts conducting proceedings pursuant to this article;

(11) the parties to a court proceeding in which information in the records is legally relevant and necessary for the determination of an issue before the court, if before the disclosure the judge has reviewed the records in camera, has determined the relevancy and necessity of the disclosure, and has limited disclosure to legally relevant information under a protective order;

(12) a grand jury by subpoena upon its determination that access to the record is necessary in the conduct of its official business;

(13) authorities in other states conducting child abuse and neglect investigations or providing child welfare services;

(14) courts in other states conducting child abuse and neglect proceedings or child custody proceedings;

(15) the director or chief executive officer of a childcare facility, child placing agency, or child caring facility when the records concern the investigation of an incident of child abuse or neglect that allegedly was perpetrated by an employee or volunteer of the facility or agency against a child served by the facility or agency;

(16) a person or agency with authorization to care for, diagnose, supervise, or treat the child, the child’s family, or the person alleged to have abused or neglected the child;

(17) any person engaged in bona fide research with the written permission of the state director or the director’s designee, subject to limitations the state director may impose;

(18) multidisciplinary teams impaneled by the department or impaneled pursuant to statute;

(19) circuit solicitors and their agents investigating or prosecuting known or suspected abuse or neglect of a child or any other crime against a child, attempting to locate a missing child, investigating or prosecuting the death of a child, or investigating or prosecuting any other crime established in or associated with activities authorized under this article;

(20) prospective adoptive or foster parents before placement;

(21) the Division for the Review of the Foster Care of Children, Office of the Governor, for purposes of certifying in accordance with Section 63‑11‑730 that no potential employee or no nominee to and no member of the state or a local foster care review board is a subject of an indicated report or affirmative determination;

(22) employees of the Division for the Review of the Foster Care of Children, Office of the Governor and members of local boards when carrying out their duties pursuant to Article 7 of Chapter 11; the department and the division shall limit by written agreement or regulation, or both, the documents and information to be furnished to the local boards;

(23) The Division of Guardian ad Litem, Office of the Governor, for purposes of certifying that no potential employee or volunteer is the subject of an indicated report or an affirmative determination.

(C) The department may limit the information disclosed to individuals and entities named in subsection (B)(13), (14), (15), (16), (17), (18), and (20) to that information necessary to accomplish the purposes for which it is requested or for which it is being disclosed. Nothing in this subsection gives to these entities or persons the right to review or copy the complete case record.

(D) When a request for access to the record comes from an individual identified in subsection (B)(5), (6), or (7) or that person’s attorney, the department shall review any reports from medical care providers and mental health care providers to determine whether the report contains information that does not pertain to the case decision, to the treatment needs of the family as a whole, or to the care of the child. If the department determines that these conditions exist, before releasing the document, the department shall provide a written notice identifying the report to the requesting party and to the person whose treatment or assessment was the subject of the report. The notice may be mailed to the parties involved or to their attorneys or it may be delivered in person. The notice shall state that the department will release the report after ten days from the date notice was mailed to all parties and that any party objecting to release may apply to the court of competent jurisdiction for relief. When a medical or mental health provider or agency furnishes copies of reports or records to the department and designates in writing that those reports or records are not to be further disclosed, the department must not disclose those documents to persons identified in subsection (B)(5), (6), or (7) or that person’s attorney. The department shall identify to the requesting party the records or reports withheld pursuant to this subsection and shall advise the requesting party that he may contact the medical or mental health provider or agency about release of the records or reports.

(E) A disclosure pursuant to this section shall protect the identity of the person who reported the suspected child abuse or neglect. The department also may protect the identity of any other person identified in the record if the department finds that disclosure of the information would be likely to endanger the life or safety of the person. Nothing in this subsection prohibits the department from subpoenaing the reporter or other persons to court for the purpose of testimony if the department determines the individual’s testimony is necessary to protect the child; the fact that the reporter made the report must not be disclosed.

(F) The department is authorized to summarize the outcome of an investigation to the person who reported the suspected child abuse or neglect if the person requests the information at the time the report is made. The department has the discretion to limit the information disclosed to the reporter based on whether the reporter has an ongoing professional or other relationship with the child or the family.

(G) The state director of the department or the director’s designee may disclose to the media information contained in child protective services records if the disclosure is limited to discussion of the department’s activities in handling the case including information placed in the public domain by other public officials, a criminal prosecution, the alleged perpetrator or the attorney for the alleged perpetrator, or other public judicial proceedings. For purposes of this subsection, information is considered “placed in the public domain” when it has been reported in the news media, is contained in public records of a criminal justice agency, is contained in public records of a court of law, or has been the subject of testimony in a public judicial proceeding.

(H) The state director or the director’s designee is authorized to prepare and release reports of the results of the department’s investigations into the deaths of children in its custody or receiving child welfare services at the time of death.

(I) The department is authorized to disclose information concerning an individual named in the Central Registry of Child Abuse and Neglect as a perpetrator when screening of an individual’s background is required by statute or regulation for employment, licensing, or any other purposes, or a request is made in writing by the person being screened. Nothing in this section prevents the department from using other information in department records when making decisions concerning licensing, employment, or placement, or performing other duties required by this act. The department also is authorized to consult any department records in providing information to persons conducting preplacement investigations of prospective adoptive parents in accordance with Section 63‑9‑520.

(J) The department is authorized to maintain in its childcare regulatory records information about investigations of suspected child abuse or neglect occurring in childcare facilities.

(1) The department must enter child abuse or neglect investigation information in its regulatory record from the beginning of the investigation and must add updated information as it becomes available. Information in the regulatory records must include at least the date of the report, the nature of the alleged abuse or neglect, the outcome of the investigation, any corrective action required, and the outcome of the corrective action plan.

(2) The department’s regulatory records must not contain the identity of the reporter or of the victim child.

(3) The identity of the perpetrator must not appear in the record unless the family court has confirmed the department’s determination or a criminal prosecution has resulted in conviction of the perpetrator.

(4) Nothing in this subsection may be construed to limit the department’s authority to use information from investigations of suspected child abuse or neglect occurring in childcare facilities to pursue an action to enjoin operation of a facility as provided in Chapter 13.

(5) Record retention provisions applicable to the department’s child protective services case records are not applicable to information contained in regulatory records concerning investigations of suspected child abuse or neglect occurring in childcare facilities.

(K) All reports made available to persons pursuant to this section must indicate whether or not an appeal is pending on the report pursuant to Subarticle 9.

(L) The department may disclose to participants in a family group conference relevant information concerning the child or family or other relevant information to the extent that the department determines that the disclosure is necessary to accomplish the purpose of the family group conference. Participants in the family group conference must be instructed to maintain the confidentiality of information disclosed by the agency.

(M) Nothing in this section may be construed to waive the confidential nature of the case record, to waive any statutory or common law privileges attaching to the department’s internal reports or to information in case records, to create a right to access under the Freedom of Information Act, or to require the department to search records or generate reports for purposes of the Freedom of Information Act.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2000.** Retention and disclosure of records of unfounded cases.

(A) Notwithstanding other provisions of the law affecting confidentiality of child protective services records and use and disclosure of records of unfounded cases, records concerning unfounded reports must be retained and disclosed as provided in this section.

(B) The alleged perpetrator in an unfounded report who has reason to believe that the report was made maliciously or in bad faith has the right to request in writing that records of the report be retained by the department for up to two years from the date of the case decision. The written request must be received by the department within thirty days of the person’s receiving notice of the case decision. A person exercising this right may request a copy of the record of the unfounded case and the department shall provide a copy of the record, subject to subsection (C).

(C) The department shall disclose to persons exercising the rights afforded them under this section whether the report was made anonymously. However, the identity of a reporter must not be made available to the person except by order of the family court.

(D) An alleged perpetrator in an unfounded case who believes the report was made maliciously or in bad faith may petition the family court to determine whether there is probable cause to believe that the reporter acted maliciously or in bad faith. The court shall determine probable cause based on an in camera review of the case record and oral or written argument, or both. If the court finds probable cause, the identity of the reporter must be disclosed to the moving party.

(E) Notwithstanding other provisions of the law affecting confidentiality of child protective services records and use and disclosure of records of unfounded cases, a court conducting civil or criminal proceedings resulting from disclosures authorized by this section may order the department to release the record to any party to the case or the law enforcement.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2010.** Annual reports.

The Department of Social Services must furnish annually to the Governor and the General Assembly a report on the incidence and prevalence of child abuse and neglect in South Carolina, the effectiveness of services provided throughout the State to protect children from this harm, and any other data considered instructive.

ARTICLE 5.

 FOSTER CARE

**SECTION 63‑7‑2310.** Protecting and nurturing children in foster care.

(A) To protect and nurture children in foster care, the Department of Social Services and its employees shall:

(1) adhere strictly to the prescribed number of personal contacts, pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1680(B)(3). These contacts must be personal, face‑to‑face visits between the caseworker or member of the casework team and the foster child. These visits may be conducted in the foster home and in the presence of other persons who reside in the foster home; however, if the caseworker suspects that the child has been abused or neglected during the placement with the foster parent, the caseworker must observe and interview the child outside the presence of other persons who reside in the foster home;

(2) ensure that a caseworker interviews the foster parent, either in person or by telephone, at least once each month. No less frequently than once every two months, ensure that a caseworker or member of the casework team interviews the foster parent face‑to‑face during a visit in the foster home;

(3) ensure that a caseworker interviews other adults residing in the foster home, as defined in Section 63‑1‑40, face‑to‑face at least once each quarter. A foster parent must notify the department if another adult moves into the home, and the caseworker must interview the adult face‑to‑face within one month after receiving notice. Interviews of foster parents pursuant to item (2) and of other adults residing in the home pursuant to this item may be conducted together or separately at the discretion of the department;

(4) ensure that its staff visit in the foster home and interview the foster parent or other adults in the home more frequently when conditions in the home, circumstances of the foster children, or other reasons defined in policy and procedure suggest that increased oversight or casework support is appropriate. When more than one caseworker is responsible for a child in the foster home, the department may assign one caseworker to conduct the required face‑to‑face interview with the other adults residing in the foster home;

(5) provide to the foster child, if age appropriate, a printed card containing a telephone number the child may use to contact a designated unit or individual within the Department of Social Services and further provide an explanation to the child that the number is to be used if problems occur which the child believes his or her caseworker cannot or will not resolve;

(6) strongly encourage by letter of invitation, provided at least three weeks in advance, the attendance of foster parents to all Foster Care Review Board proceedings held for children in their care. If the foster parents are unable to attend the proceedings, they must submit a progress report to the Office of the Governor, Division of Foster Care Review, at least three days prior to the proceeding. Failure of a foster parent to attend the Foster Care Review Board proceeding or failure to submit a progress report to the Division of Foster Care Review does not require the board to delay the proceeding. The letter of invitation and the progress report form must be supplied by the agency;

(7) be placed under the full authority of sanctions and enforcement by the family court pursuant to Section 63‑3‑530(30) and Section 63‑3‑530(36) for failure to adhere to the requirements of this subsection.

(B) If the department places a child in foster care in a county which does not have jurisdiction of the case, the department may designate a caseworker in the county of placement to make the visits required by subsection (A).

(C) In fulfilling the requirements of subsection (A), the Department of Social Services shall reasonably perform its tasks in a manner which is least intrusive and disruptive to the lives of the foster children and their foster families.

(D) The Department of Social Services, in executing its duties under subsection (A)(4), must provide a toll free telephone number which must operate twenty‑four hours a day.

(E) Any public employee in this State who has actual knowledge that a person has violated any of the provisions of subsection (A) must report those violations to the state office of the Department of Social Services; however, the Governor’s Division of Foster Care Review must report violations of subsection (A)(4) in their regular submissions of advisory decisions and recommendations which are submitted to the family court and the department. Any employee who knowingly fails to report a violation of subsection (A) is guilty of a misdemeanor and, upon conviction, must be fined not more than five hundred dollars or imprisoned not more than thirty days, or both.

(F) Foster parents have a duty to make themselves reasonably available for the interviews required by subsection (A)(2) and to take reasonable steps to facilitate caseworkers’ interviews with other adults who reside in the home as required by subsection (A)(3). Failure to comply with either the duties in this subsection or those in subsection (A)(3) constitutes grounds for revocation of a foster parent’s license or other form of approval to provide care to children in the custody of the department. Revocation would depend on the number of instances of noncompliance, the foster parents’ wilfulness in noncompliance, or other circumstances indicating that noncompliance by the foster parents significantly and unreasonably interferes with the department’s ability to carry out its protective functions under this section.

(G) To further this state’s long‑term goals and objectives on behalf of children in foster care, the Department of Social Services shall give to the General Assembly by January 15, 2000, a report of the status of the foster care system which includes improvements the department has made to ensure the safety and quality of life of South Carolina’s foster children. This report must include:

(1) specific standards for the training of foster parents, including the type of training which is provided;

(2) standards which address emergency situations affecting the maximum number of children placed in each foster home;

(3) standards which provide for the periodic determination of the medical condition of a child during his stay in foster care; and

(4) methods the department has developed to encourage the receipt of information on the needs of children in foster care from persons who have been recently emancipated from the foster care system.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2320.** Kinship Foster Care program.

(A) As used in this section, unless the context otherwise requires:

(1) “Department” means the Department of Social Services; and

(2) “Foster parent” means any person with whom a child in the care, custody, or guardianship of the department is placed for temporary or long‑term care.

(B) There is established a “Kinship Foster Care Program” in the State Department of Social Services.

(C) When a child has been removed from his home and is in the care, custody, or guardianship of the department, the department shall attempt to identify a relative who would be appropriate for placement of the child in accordance with the preliminary investigation requirements of Subarticle 3, Article 3 and in accordance with Section 63‑7‑1680(B)(6). If the department determines that it is in the best interest of a child requiring out‑of‑home placement that the child be placed with a relative for foster care, or if a relative advises the department that the relative is interested in providing placement for a child requiring foster care, and the relative is not already licensed to provide foster care, the department shall inform the relative of the procedures for being licensed as a kinship foster parent, assist the foster parent with the licensing process, and inform the relative of availability of payments and other services to kinship foster parents. If the relative is licensed by the department to provide kinship foster care services, in accordance with rules and regulations adopted by the department regarding kinship foster care, and a placement with the relative is made, the relative may receive payment for the full foster care rate for the care of the child and any other benefits that might be available to foster parents, whether in money or in services.

(D) The department shall establish, in accordance with this section and the rules and regulations promulgated hereunder, eligibility standards for becoming a kinship foster parent.

(1) Relatives within the first, second, or third degree to the parent or stepparent of a child who may be related through blood, marriage, or adoption may be eligible for licensing as a kinship foster parent.

(2) The kinship foster parent must be twenty‑one years of age or older, except that if the spouse or partner of the relative is twenty‑one years of age or older and living in the home, and the relative is between eighteen and twenty‑one years of age, the department may waive the age requirement.

(3)(a) A person may become a kinship foster parent only upon the completion of a full kinship foster care licensing study performed in accordance with rules and regulations promulgated pursuant to this section. Residents of the household who are age eighteen years of age or older must undergo the state and federal fingerprint review procedures as provided for in Section 63‑7‑2340. The department shall apply the screening criteria in Section 63‑7‑2350 to the results of the fingerprint reviews and the licensing study.

(b) The department shall maintain the confidentiality of the results of fingerprint reviews as provided for in state and federal regulations.

(4) The department shall determine, after a thorough review of information obtained in the kinship foster care licensing process, whether the person is able to care effectively for the foster child.

(E)(1) The department shall involve the kinship foster parents in development of the child’s permanent plan pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1700 and other plans for services to the child and the kinship foster home. The department shall give notice of proceedings and information to the kinship foster parent as provided for elsewhere in this chapter for other foster parents. If planning for the child includes the use of childcare, the department shall pay for childcare arrangements, according to established criteria for payment of these services for foster children. If the permanent plan for the child involves requesting the court to grant custody or guardianship of the child to the kinship foster parent, the department must ensure that it has informed the kinship foster parent about adoption, including services and financial benefits that might be available.

(2) The kinship foster parent shall cooperate with any activities specified in the case plan for the foster child, such as counseling, therapy or court sessions, or visits with the foster child’s parents or other family members. Kinship foster parents and placements made in kinship foster care homes are subject to the requirements of Section 63‑7‑2310.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2330.** Placement with relatives.

(A) When the Department of Social Services has custody of a child and places that child with a relative who is licensed to provide foster care, the agency must provide the same services and financial benefits as provided to other licensed foster homes. Children placed pursuant to this section are subject to the permanency planning requirements in Section 63‑7‑1700.

(B) If the department has determined that it is in the best interest of a child requiring foster care that the child be placed with a relative, and the relative is not licensed to provide foster care, or if a relative advises the department that the relative is interested in providing placement for a child requiring foster care, the department shall inform the relative of the procedures for obtaining licensure and the benefits of licensure. The department also shall provide information and reasonable assistance to a relative seeking a foster care license to the same extent that it provides this information and assistance to other persons contacting the department about foster care licensing.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2340.** Fingerprint review.

(A) A person applying for licensure as a foster parent and a person eighteen years of age or older, residing in a home in which a person has applied to be licensed as a foster parent, must undergo a state fingerprint review to be conducted by the State Law Enforcement Division to determine any state criminal history and a fingerprinting review to be conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to determine any other criminal history.

(B) Any fee charged by the Federal Bureau of Investigation for the fingerprint review must be paid by the individual.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2345.** Payment of costs of Federal Bureau of Investigation fingerprint reviews.

Notwithstanding the provisions of Section 63‑7‑2350, the department is authorized to pay from funds appropriated for foster care the costs of Federal Bureau of Investigation fingerprint reviews for foster care families recruited, selected, and licensed by the department.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2350.** Restrictions on foster care placements.

(A) No child may be placed in foster care with a person:

(1) with a substantiated history of child abuse or neglect; or

(2) who has pled guilty or nolo contendere to or who has been convicted of:

(a) an “Offense Against the Person” as provided for in Chapter 3, Title 16;

(b) an “Offense Against Morality or Decency” as provided for in Chapter 15, Title 16;

(c) contributing to the delinquency of a minor as provided for in Section 16‑17‑490;

(d) the common law offense of assault and battery of a high and aggravated nature when the victim was a person seventeen years of age or younger;

(e) criminal domestic violence, as defined in Section 16‑25‑20;

(f) criminal domestic violence of a high and aggravated nature, as defined in Section 16‑25‑65;

(g) a felony drug‑related offense under the laws of this State.

(B) A person who has been convicted of a criminal offense similar in nature to a crime enumerated in subsection (A) when the crime was committed in another jurisdiction or under federal law is subject to the restrictions set out in this section.

(C) This section does not prevent foster care placement when a conviction or plea of guilty or nolo contendere for one of the crimes enumerated in subsection (A) has been pardoned. However, notwithstanding the entry of a pardon, the department or other entity making placement or licensing decisions may consider all information available, including the person’s pardoned convictions or pleas and the circumstances surrounding them, to determine whether the applicant is unfit or otherwise unsuited to provide foster care services.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2360.** Placement of minor sex offenders.

(A) No agency may place a minor in a foster home if the agency has actual knowledge that the minor has been adjudicated delinquent for, or has pled guilty or nolo contendere to, or has been convicted of a sex offense, unless the placement is in a therapeutic foster home or unless the minor is the only child in the foster home at the time of placement and for the length of that minor’s placement in the foster home. Notwithstanding this provision, the placing agency may petition the court for an order allowing the minor to be placed in a foster home, other than a therapeutic home, if good cause is shown. Good cause shall include, but not be limited to, the fact that the minor is being placed in a home with his siblings.

(B) The placing agency must inform the foster parent in whose home the minor is placed of that minor’s prior history of a sex offense. For purposes of this section the term “sex offense” means:

(1) criminal sexual conduct in the first degree, as provided in Section 16‑3‑652;

(2) criminal sexual conduct in the second degree, as provided in Section 16‑3‑653;

(3) criminal sexual conduct in the third degree, as provided in Section 16‑3‑654;

(4) criminal sexual conduct with minors in the first degree, as provided in Section 16‑3‑655(A);

(5) criminal sexual conduct with minors in the second degree, as provided in Section 16‑3‑655(B);

(6) engaging a child for a sexual performance, as provided in Section 16‑3‑810;

(7) producing, directing, or promoting sexual performance by a child, as provided in Section 16‑3‑820;

(8) assault with intent to commit criminal sexual conduct, as provided in Section 16‑3‑656;

(9) incest, as provided in Section 16‑15‑20;

(10) buggery, as provided in Section 16‑15‑120;

(11) committing or attempting lewd act upon child under sixteen, as provided in Section 16‑15‑140;

(12) violations of Article 3, Chapter 15 of Title 16 involving a child when the violations are felonies;

(13) accessory before the fact to commit an offense enumerated in this item and as provided for in Section 16‑1‑40;

(14) attempt to commit any of the offenses enumerated herein; or

(15) any offense for which the judge makes a specific finding on the record that based on the circumstances of the case, the minor’s offense should be considered a sex offense.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2370.** Disclosure of information to foster parents.

The department shall disclose to the foster parent at the time the department places the child in the home all information known by the person making the placement or reasonably accessible to the person making the placement which could affect either the ability of the foster parent to care for the child or the health and safety of the child or the foster family. This information includes, but is not limited to, medical and mental health conditions and history of the child, the nature of abuse or neglect to which the child has been subjected, behavioral problems, and matters related to educational needs. If a person lacking this necessary information made the placement, a member of the child’s casework team or the child’s caseworker shall contact the foster parent and provide the information during the first working day following the placement. The child’s caseworker shall research the child’s record and shall supplement the information provided to the foster parent no later than the end of the first week of placement if additional information is found. When the child’s caseworker acquires new information which could affect either the ability of the foster parent to care for the child or the health and safety of the child or the foster family, the department shall disclose that information to the foster parent. The obligation to provide this information continues until the placement ends.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2380.** Foster parent training.

The Department of Social Services shall establish standards for foster parent training so as to ensure uniform preparedness for foster parents who care for abused or neglected children in the custody of the State. These standards shall specifically prohibit the viewing of standard television programs or reading of articles from popular magazines or daily newspapers as complying with the completion of pre‑service or annual foster parent training requirements.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2390.** Loss for uninsured damages.

A state agency which places a child in a foster home may compensate a foster family, who has made its private residence available as a foster home, for the uninsured loss it incurs when its personal or real property is damaged, destroyed, or stolen by a child placed in its home, if the loss is found by the director of the placing state agency, or his designee, to have occurred, to have been caused solely or primarily by the acts of the child placed with the foster family, and if the acts of the foster family have not in any way caused or contributed to the loss. Compensation may not be in excess of the actual cost of repair or replacement of the damaged or destroyed property but in no case may compensation exceed five hundred dollars for each occurrence.

ARTICLE 7.

 TERMINATION OF PARENTAL RIGHTS

**SECTION 63‑7‑2510.** Purpose.

The purpose of this article is to establish procedures for the reasonable and compassionate termination of parental rights where children are abused, neglected, or abandoned in order to protect the health and welfare of these children and make them eligible for adoption by persons who will provide a suitable home environment and the love and care necessary for a happy, healthful, and productive life.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2520.** Jurisdiction.

The family court has exclusive jurisdiction over all proceedings held pursuant to this article. For purposes of this article jurisdiction may continue until the child becomes eighteen years of age, unless emancipated earlier.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2530.** Filing procedures.

(A) A petition seeking termination of parental rights may be filed by the Department of Social Services or any interested party.

(B) The department may file an action for termination of parental rights without first seeking the court’s approval of a change in the permanency plan pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1680 and without first seeking an amendment of the placement plan pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1700.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2540.** Content of petition.

A petition for the termination of parental rights must set forth the:

(1) basis of the court’s jurisdiction;

(2) name, sex, date, and place of birth of the child, if known;

(3) name and address of the petitioner and the petitioner’s relationship to the child;

(4) names, dates of birth, and addresses of the parents, if known;

(5) names and addresses of a:

(a) legal guardian of the child; or

(b) person or agency having legal custody of the child; and

(6) grounds on which termination of parental rights are sought and the underlying factual circumstances.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2550.** Service of petition.

A summons and petition for termination of parental rights must be filed with the court and served on:

(1) the child;

(2) the parents of the child; and

(3) an agency with placement or custody of the child.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2560.** Representation by counsel; guardian ad litem.

(A) Parents, guardians, or other persons subject to a termination of parental rights action are entitled to legal counsel. Those persons unable to afford legal representation must be appointed counsel by the family court, unless the defendant is in default.

(B) A child subject to any judicial proceeding under this article must be appointed a guardian ad litem by the family court. If a guardian ad litem who is not an attorney finds that appointment of counsel is necessary to protect the rights and interests of the child, an attorney must be appointed. If the guardian ad litem is an attorney, the judge must determine on a case‑by‑case basis whether counsel is required for the guardian ad litem. However, counsel must be appointed for a guardian ad litem who is not an attorney in any case that is contested.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2570.** Grounds.

The family court may order the termination of parental rights upon a finding of one or more of the following grounds and a finding that termination is in the best interest of the child:

(1) The child or another child in the home has been harmed as defined in Section 63‑7‑20, and because of the severity or repetition of the abuse or neglect, it is not reasonably likely that the home can be made safe within twelve months. In determining the likelihood that the home can be made safe, the parent’s previous abuse or neglect of the child or another child in the home may be considered.

(2) The child has been removed from the parent pursuant to Subarticle 3 or Section 63‑7‑1660, has been out of the home for a period of six months following the adoption of a placement plan by court order or by agreement between the department and the parent, and the parent has not remedied the conditions which caused the removal.

(3) The child has lived outside the home of either parent for a period of six months, and during that time the parent has wilfully failed to visit the child. The court may attach little or no weight to incidental visitations, but it must be shown that the parent was not prevented from visiting by the party having custody or by court order. The distance of the child’s placement from the parent’s home must be taken into consideration when determining the ability to visit.

(4) The child has lived outside the home of either parent for a period of six months, and during that time the parent has wilfully failed to support the child. Failure to support means that the parent has failed to make a material contribution to the child’s care. A material contribution consists of either financial contributions according to the parent’s means or contributions of food, clothing, shelter, or other necessities for the care of the child according to the parent’s means. The court may consider all relevant circumstances in determining whether or not the parent has wilfully failed to support the child, including requests for support by the custodian and the ability of the parent to provide support.

(5) The presumptive legal father is not the biological father of the child, and the welfare of the child can best be served by termination of the parental rights of the presumptive legal father.

(6) The parent has a diagnosable condition unlikely to change within a reasonable time including, but not limited to, alcohol or drug addiction, mental deficiency, mental illness, or extreme physical incapacity, and the condition makes the parent unlikely to provide minimally acceptable care of the child. It is presumed that the parent’s condition is unlikely to change within a reasonable time upon proof that the parent has been required by the department or the family court to participate in a treatment program for alcohol or drug addiction, and the parent has failed two or more times to complete the program successfully or has refused at two or more separate meetings with the department to participate in a treatment program.

(7) The child has been abandoned as defined in Section 63‑7‑20.

(8) The child has been in foster care under the responsibility of the State for fifteen of the most recent twenty‑two months.

(9) The physical abuse of a child of the parent resulted in the death or admission to the hospital for in‑patient care of that child and the abuse is the act for which the parent has been convicted of or pled guilty or nolo contendere to committing, aiding, abetting, conspiring to commit, or soliciting an offense against the person as provided for in Title 16, Chapter 3, criminal domestic violence as defined in Section 16‑25‑20, criminal domestic violence of a high and aggravated nature as defined in Section 16‑25‑65, or the common law offense of assault and battery of a high and aggravated nature.

(10) A parent of the child pleads guilty or nolo contendere to or is convicted of the murder of the child’s other parent.

(11) Conception of a child as a result of the criminal sexual conduct of a biological parent, as found by a court of competent jurisdiction, is grounds for terminating the rights of that biological parent, unless the sentencing court makes specific findings on the record that the conviction resulted from consensual sexual conduct where neither the victim nor the actor were younger than fourteen years of age nor older than eighteen years of age at the time of the offense.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2580.** Permanency of order.

(A) If the court finds that a ground for termination, as provided for in Section 63‑7‑2570, exists, the court may issue an order forever terminating parental rights to the child. Where the petitioner is an authorized agency, the court shall place the child in the custody of the petitioner or other child‑placing agency for adoption and shall require the submission of a plan for permanent placement of the child within thirty days after the close of the proceedings to the court and to the child’s guardian ad litem. Within an additional sixty days the agency shall submit a report to the court and to the guardian ad litem on the implementation of the plan. The court, on its own motion, may schedule a hearing to review the progress of the implementation of the plan.

(B) If the court finds that no ground for termination exists and the child is in the custody of the Department of Social Services, the order denying termination must specify a new permanent plan for the child or order a hearing on a new permanent plan.

(C) If the court determines that an additional permanency hearing is not needed, the court may order:

(1) the child returned to the child’s parent if the parent has counterclaimed for custody and the court determines that the return of the child to the parent would not cause an unreasonable risk of harm to the child’s life, physical health or safety, or mental well‑being. The court may order a specified period of supervision and services not to exceed twelve months;

(2) a disposition provided for in Section 63‑7‑1700(E) if the court determines that the child should not be returned to a parent.

(D)(1) If the court determines that an additional permanency hearing is required, the court’s order shall schedule a permanency hearing to be held within fifteen days of the date the order is filed. The court’s order must be sufficient to continue jurisdiction over the parties without any need for filing or service of pleadings by the department. The permanency hearing must be held before the termination of parental rights trial if reasonably possible.

(2) At the hearing, the department shall present a proposed disposition and permanent plan in accordance with Section 63‑7‑1700. No supplemental report may be required. The hearing and any order issuing from the hearing shall conform to Section 63‑7‑1700.

(3) If the court approves retention of the child in foster care pursuant to Section 63‑7‑1700(E), any new plan for services and placement of the child must conform to the requirements of Section 63‑7‑1680. Section 63‑7‑1680 requires the plan to address conditions that necessitated removal of the child, but the plan approved pursuant to this subsection shall address conditions that necessitate retention of the child in foster care.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2590.** Effect of order.

(A) An order terminating the relationship between parent and child under this article divests the parent and the child of all legal rights, powers, privileges, immunities, duties, and obligations with respect to each other, except the right of the child to inherit from the parent. A right of inheritance is terminated only by a final order of adoption.

(B) The relationship between a parent and child may be terminated with respect to one parent without affecting the relationship between the child and the other parent.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2600.** Confidentiality.

All papers and records pertaining to a termination of parental rights are confidential and all court records must be sealed and opened only upon order of the judge for good cause shown.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2610.** Effect on adoption laws.

The provisions of this article do not, except as specifically provided, modify or supersede the general adoption laws of this State.

**SECTION 63‑7‑2620.** Construction of law.

This article must be liberally construed in order to ensure prompt judicial procedures for freeing minor children from the custody and control of their parents by terminating the parent‑child relationship. The interests of the child shall prevail if the child’s interest and the parental rights conflict.