

SENATE BILL NO. 156

INTRODUCED BY D. EMRICH

A BILL FOR AN ACT ENTITLED: "AN ACT GENERALLY REVISING EVIDENTIARY BURDENS RELATED TO CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT PROCEEDINGS; ~~PROVIDING THAT ORDERS OF ADJUDICATION, TEMPORARY LEGAL CUSTODY, AND LONG TERM CUSTODY MAY ONLY BE ISSUED ON CLEAR AND CONVINCING EVIDENCE;~~ PROVIDING THAT AN ORDER OF TERMINATION MAY ONLY BE ISSUED ON PROOF BEYOND A REASONABLE DOUBT; AND AMENDING SECTIONS 41-3-422, ~~41-3-423, 41-3-434, 41-3-437, 41-3-442, 41-3-445,~~ 41-3-609, AND 41-3-615, MCA."

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF MONTANA:

Section 1. Section 41-3-422, MCA, is amended to read:

~~"41-3-422. (Temporary) Abuse and neglect petitions — burden of proof. (1) (a) Proceedings under this chapter must be initiated by the filing of a petition. A petition may request the following relief:~~

~~(i) — immediate protection and emergency protective services, as provided in 41-3-427;~~

~~(ii) — temporary investigative authority, as provided in 41-3-433;~~

~~(iii) — temporary legal custody, as provided in 41-3-442;~~

~~(iv) — long term custody, as provided in 41-3-445;~~

~~(v) — termination of the parent-child legal relationship, as provided in 41-3-607;~~

~~(vi) — appointment of a guardian pursuant to 41-3-444;~~

~~(vii) — a determination that preservation or reunification services need not be provided; or~~

~~(viii) — any combination of the provisions of subsections (1)(a)(i) through (1)(a)(vii) or any other relief that may be required for the best interests of the child.~~

~~(b) — The petition may be modified for different relief at any time within the discretion of the court.~~

~~(c) — A petition for temporary legal custody may be the initial petition filed in a case.~~

~~(d) — A petition for the termination of the parent-child legal relationship may be the initial petition filed in a case if a request for a determination that preservation or reunification services need not be provided is~~

made in the petition.

(2) — The county attorney, attorney general, or an attorney hired by the county shall file all petitions under this chapter. A petition filed by the county attorney, attorney general, or an attorney hired by the county must be accompanied by:

(a) — an affidavit by the department alleging that the child appears to have been abused or neglected and stating the basis for the petition; and

(b) — a separate notice to the court stating any statutory time deadline for a hearing.

(3) — Abuse and neglect petitions must be given highest preference by the court in setting hearing dates.

(4) — An abuse and neglect petition is a civil action brought in the name of the state of Montana. The Montana Rules of Civil Procedure and the Montana Rules of Evidence apply except as modified in this chapter. Proceedings under a petition are not a bar to criminal prosecution.

(5) — (a) Except as provided in subsection (5)(b), the person filing the abuse and neglect petition has the burden of presenting evidence required to justify the relief requested and establishing:

(i) — probable cause for the issuance of an order for immediate protection and emergency protective services or an order for temporary investigative authority;

(ii) — a preponderance of the evidence for an order of adjudication or temporary legal custody;

(iii) — a preponderance of the evidence for an order of long-term custody; or

(iv) — clear and convincing evidence for an order terminating the parent-child legal relationship.

(b) — If a proceeding under this chapter involves an Indian child, as defined in the federal Indian Child Welfare Act, 25 U.S.C. 1901, et seq., or 41-3-1303, the standards of proof required for legal relief under the federal Indian Child Welfare Act and the Montana Indian Child Welfare Act provided for in Title 41, chapter 3, part 13, apply.

(6) — (a) Except as provided in the federal Indian Child Welfare Act and the Montana Indian Child Welfare Act, if applicable, the parents or parent, guardian, or other person or agency having legal custody of the child named in the petition, if residing in the state, must be served personally with a copy of the initial petition and a petition to terminate the parent-child legal relationship at least 5 days before the date set for hearing. If the person or agency cannot be served personally, the person or agency may be served by

publication as provided in 41-3-428 and 41-3-429.

(b) ~~Copies of all other petitions must be served upon the person or the person's attorney of record by certified mail, by personal service, or by publication as provided in 41-3-428 and 41-3-429. If service is by certified mail, the department must receive a return receipt signed by the person to whom the notice was mailed for the service to be effective. Service of the notice is considered to be effective if, in the absence of a return receipt, the person to whom the notice was mailed appears at the hearing.~~

(7) ~~If personal service cannot be made upon the parents or parent, guardian, or other person or agency having legal custody, the court shall immediately provide for the appointment or assignment of an attorney as provided for in 41-3-425 to represent the unavailable party when, in the opinion of the court, the interests of justice require. If personal service cannot be made upon a putative father, the court may not provide for the appointment or assignment of counsel as provided for in 41-3-425 to represent the father unless, in the opinion of the court, the interests of justice require counsel to be appointed or assigned.~~

(8) ~~If a parent of the child is a minor, notice must be given to the minor parent's parents or guardian, and if there is no guardian, the court shall appoint one.~~

(9) ~~(a) Any person interested in any cause under this chapter has the right to appear. Any foster parent, preadoptive parent, or relative caring for the child must be given legal notice by the attorney filing the petition of all judicial hearings for the child and has the right to be heard. The right to appear or to be heard does not make that person a party to the action. Any foster parent, preadoptive parent, or relative caring for the child must be given notice of all reviews by the reviewing body.~~

(b) ~~A foster parent, preadoptive parent, or relative of the child who is caring for or a relative of the child who has cared for a child who is the subject of the petition who appears at a hearing set pursuant to this section may be allowed by the court to intervene in the action if the court, after a hearing in which evidence is presented on those subjects provided for in 41-3-437(4), determines that the intervention of the person is in the best interests of the child. A person granted intervention pursuant to this subsection is entitled to participate in the adjudicatory hearing held pursuant to 41-3-437 and to notice and participation in subsequent proceedings held pursuant to this chapter involving the custody of the child.~~

(c) ~~Whenever a child is placed with a foster parent, preadoptive parent, or relative, the department shall provide written notice to the foster parent, preadoptive parent, or relative explaining the foster parent's,~~

~~preadoptive parent's, or relative's rights under this subsection (9) to receive notice, to appear and be heard, and to attempt to intervene in proceedings under this chapter.~~

~~(10) — An abuse and neglect petition must state:~~

~~(a) — the nature of the alleged abuse or neglect and of the relief requested;~~

~~(b) — the full name, age, and address of the child and the name and address of the child's parents or the guardian or person having legal custody of the child; and~~

~~(c) — the names, addresses, and relationship to the child of all persons who are necessary parties to the action.~~

~~(11) — Any party in a proceeding pursuant to this section is entitled to counsel as provided in 41-3-425.~~

~~(12) — At any stage of the proceedings considered appropriate by the court, the court may order an alternative dispute resolution proceeding or the parties may voluntarily participate in an alternative dispute resolution proceeding. An alternative dispute resolution proceeding under this chapter may include a family engagement meeting, mediation, or a settlement conference. If a court orders an alternative dispute resolution proceeding, a party who does not wish to participate may file a motion objecting to the order. If the department is a party to the original proceeding, a representative of the department who has complete authority to settle the issue or issues in the original proceeding must be present at any alternative dispute resolution proceeding.~~

~~(13) — Service of a petition under this section must be accompanied by a written notice advising the child's parent, guardian, or other person having physical or legal custody of the child of the:~~

~~(a) — right, pursuant to 41-3-425, to appointment or assignment of counsel if the person is indigent or if appointment or assignment of counsel is required under the federal Indian Child Welfare Act or the Montana Indian Child Welfare Act, if applicable;~~

~~(b) — right to contest the allegations in the petition; and~~

~~(c) — timelines for hearings and determinations required under this chapter.~~

~~(14) — If appropriate, orders issued under this chapter must contain a notice provision advising a child's parent, guardian, or other person having physical or legal custody of the child that:~~

~~(a) — the court is required by federal and state laws to hold a permanency hearing to determine the permanent placement of a child no later than 12 months after a judge determines that the child has been~~

~~abused or neglected or 12 months after the first 60 days that the child has been removed from the child's home;~~

~~(b) — if a child has been in foster care for 15 of the last 22 months, state law presumes that termination of parental rights is in the best interests of the child and the state is required to file a petition to terminate parental rights; and~~

~~(c) — completion of a treatment plan does not guarantee the return of a child.~~

~~(15) — A court may appoint a standing master to conduct hearings and propose decisions and orders to the court for court consideration and action. A standing master may not conduct a proceeding to terminate parental rights. A standing master must be a member of the state bar of Montana and must be knowledgeable in the area of child abuse and neglect laws. (Terminates June 30, 2025—sec. 55, Ch. 716, L. 2023.)~~

41-3-422. ~~(Effective July 1, 2025)~~ Abuse and neglect petitions -- burden of proof. (1) (a)

Proceedings under this chapter must be initiated by the filing of a petition. A petition may request the following relief:

- (i) immediate protection and emergency protective services, as provided in 41-3-427;
- (ii) temporary investigative authority, as provided in 41-3-433;
- (iii) temporary legal custody, as provided in 41-3-442;
- (iv) long-term custody, as provided in 41-3-445;
- (v) termination of the parent-child legal relationship, as provided in 41-3-607;
- (vi) appointment of a guardian pursuant to 41-3-444;
- (vii) a determination that preservation or reunification services need not be provided; or
- (viii) any combination of the provisions of subsections (1)(a)(i) through (1)(a)(vii) or any other relief

that may be required for the best interests of the child.

(b) The petition may be modified for different relief at any time within the discretion of the court.

(c) A petition for temporary legal custody may be the initial petition filed in a case.

(d) A petition for the termination of the parent-child legal relationship may be the initial petition filed in a case if a request for a determination that preservation or reunification services need not be provided is made in the petition.

(2) The county attorney, attorney general, or an attorney hired by the county shall file all petitions under this chapter. A petition filed by the county attorney, attorney general, or an attorney hired by the county

1 must be accompanied by:

2 (a) an affidavit by the department alleging that the child appears to have been abused or neglected
3 and stating the basis for the petition; and

4 (b) a separate notice to the court stating any statutory time deadline for a hearing.

5 (3) Abuse and neglect petitions must be given highest preference by the court in setting hearing
6 dates.

7 (4) An abuse and neglect petition is a civil action brought in the name of the state of Montana. The
8 Montana Rules of Civil Procedure and the Montana Rules of Evidence apply except as modified in this chapter.
9 Proceedings under a petition are not a bar to criminal prosecution.

10 (5) (a) Except as provided in subsection (5)(b), the person filing the abuse and neglect petition has
11 the burden of presenting evidence required to justify the relief requested and establishing:

12 (i) probable cause for the issuance of an order for immediate protection and emergency protective
13 services or an order for temporary investigative authority;

14 (ii) ~~a preponderance of the evidence~~ clear and convincing evidence ~~a preponderance of the~~
15 evidence for an order of adjudication or temporary legal custody;

16 (iii) ~~a preponderance of the evidence~~ clear and convincing evidence ~~a preponderance of the~~
17 evidence for an order of long-term custody; or

18 (iv) ~~clear and convincing evidence~~ proof beyond a reasonable doubt for an order terminating the
19 parent-child legal relationship.

20 (b) If a proceeding under this chapter involves an Indian child, as defined in the federal Indian
21 Child Welfare Act, 25 U.S.C. 1901, et seq., the standards of proof required for legal relief under the federal
22 Indian Child Welfare Act apply.

23 (6) (a) Except as provided in the federal Indian Child Welfare Act, if applicable, the parents or
24 parent, guardian, or other person or agency having legal custody of the child named in the petition, if residing in
25 the state, must be served personally with a copy of the initial petition and a petition to terminate the parent-child
26 legal relationship at least 5 days before the date set for hearing. If the person or agency cannot be served
27 personally, the person or agency may be served by publication as provided in 41-3-428 and 41-3-429.

28 (b) Copies of all other petitions must be served upon the person or the person's attorney of record

1 by certified mail, by personal service, or by publication as provided in 41-3-428 and 41-3-429. If service is by
2 certified mail, the department must receive a return receipt signed by the person to whom the notice was mailed
3 for the service to be effective. Service of the notice is considered to be effective if, in the absence of a return
4 receipt, the person to whom the notice was mailed appears at the hearing.

5 (7) If personal service cannot be made upon the parents or parent, guardian, or other person or
6 agency having legal custody, the court shall immediately provide for the appointment or assignment of an
7 attorney as provided for in 41-3-425 to represent the unavailable party when, in the opinion of the court, the
8 interests of justice require. If personal service cannot be made upon a putative father, the court may not provide
9 for the appointment or assignment of counsel as provided for in 41-3-425 to represent the father unless, in the
10 opinion of the court, the interests of justice require counsel to be appointed or assigned.

11 (8) If a parent of the child is a minor, notice must be given to the minor parent's parents or
12 guardian, and if there is no guardian, the court shall appoint one.

13 (9) (a) Any person interested in any cause under this chapter has the right to appear. Any foster
14 parent, preadoptive parent, or relative caring for the child must be given legal notice by the attorney filing the
15 petition of all judicial hearings for the child and has the right to be heard. The right to appear or to be heard
16 does not make that person a party to the action. Any foster parent, preadoptive parent, or relative caring for the
17 child must be given notice of all reviews by the reviewing body.

18 (b) A foster parent, preadoptive parent, or relative of the child who is caring for or a relative of the
19 child who has cared for a child who is the subject of the petition who appears at a hearing set pursuant to this
20 section may be allowed by the court to intervene in the action if the court, after a hearing in which evidence is
21 presented on those subjects provided for in 41-3-437(4), determines that the intervention of the person is in the
22 best interests of the child. A person granted intervention pursuant to this subsection is entitled to participate in
23 the adjudicatory hearing held pursuant to 41-3-437 and to notice and participation in subsequent proceedings
24 held pursuant to this chapter involving the custody of the child.

25 (c) Whenever a child is placed with a foster parent, preadoptive parent, or relative, the department
26 shall provide written notice to the foster parent, preadoptive parent, or relative explaining the foster parent's,
27 preadoptive parent's, or relative's rights under this subsection (9) to receive notice, to appear and be heard, and
28 to attempt to intervene in proceedings under this chapter.

(10) An abuse and neglect petition must state:

(a) the nature of the alleged abuse or neglect and of the relief requested;

(b) the full name, age, and address of the child and the name and address of the child's parents or the guardian or person having legal custody of the child; and

(c) the names, addresses, and relationship to the child of all persons who are necessary parties to the action.

(11) Any party in a proceeding pursuant to this section is entitled to counsel as provided in 41-3-425.

(12) At any stage of the proceedings considered appropriate by the court, the court may order an alternative dispute resolution proceeding or the parties may voluntarily participate in an alternative dispute resolution proceeding. An alternative dispute resolution proceeding under this chapter may include a family engagement meeting, mediation, or a settlement conference. If a court orders an alternative dispute resolution proceeding, a party who does not wish to participate may file a motion objecting to the order. If the department is a party to the original proceeding, a representative of the department who has complete authority to settle the issue or issues in the original proceeding must be present at any alternative dispute resolution proceeding.

(13) Service of a petition under this section must be accompanied by a written notice advising the child's parent, guardian, or other person having physical or legal custody of the child of the:

(a) right, pursuant to 41-3-425, to appointment or assignment of counsel if the person is indigent or if appointment or assignment of counsel is required under the federal Indian Child Welfare Act, if applicable;

(b) right to contest the allegations in the petition; and

(c) timelines for hearings and determinations required under this chapter.

(14) If appropriate, orders issued under this chapter must contain a notice provision advising a child's parent, guardian, or other person having physical or legal custody of the child that:

(a) the court is required by federal and state laws to hold a permanency hearing to determine the permanent placement of a child no later than 12 months after a judge determines that the child has been abused or neglected or 12 months after the first 60 days that the child has been removed from the child's home;

(b) if a child has been in foster care for 15 of the last 22 months, state law presumes that termination of parental rights is in the best interests of the child and the state is required to file a petition to

1 terminate parental rights; and

2 (c) completion of a treatment plan does not guarantee the return of a child.

3 (15) A court may appoint a standing master to conduct hearings and propose decisions and orders
4 to the court for court consideration and action. A standing master may not conduct a proceeding to terminate
5 parental rights. A standing master must be a member of the state bar of Montana and must be knowledgeable
6 in the area of child abuse and neglect laws."

7
8 **Section 2. Section 41-3-423, MCA, is amended to read:**

9 ~~"41-3-423. Reasonable efforts required to prevent removal of child or to return -- exemption --~~
10 ~~findings -- permanency plan. (1) (a) The department shall make reasonable efforts to prevent the necessity of~~
11 ~~removal of a child from the child's home and to reunify families that have been separated by the state.~~

12 ~~(b) For the purposes of this subsection (1), the term "reasonable efforts" means the department~~
13 ~~shall in good faith:~~

14 ~~(i) conduct a comprehensive assessment of the circumstances of the family, with a focus on safe~~
15 ~~reunification as the most desirable goal. The assessment must be provided to the parents and to counsel for~~
16 ~~the parents.~~

17 ~~(ii) identify appropriate services and help the parents overcome barriers, including actively~~
18 ~~assisting the parents in obtaining appropriate services;~~

19 ~~(iii) with parental consent, identify and invite the extended family to participate in providing support~~
20 ~~and services to the family and to participate in family team meetings, permanency planning, and resolution of~~
21 ~~placement issues;~~

22 ~~(iv) conduct or cause to be conducted a diligent search for the child's extended family members~~
23 ~~and contact and consult with extended family members to provide family structure and support for the child and~~
24 ~~the parents;~~

25 ~~(v) offer and employ all available and culturally appropriate family preservation strategies and~~
26 ~~facilitate the use of remedial and rehabilitative services;~~

27 ~~(vi) take steps to keep siblings together whenever possible;~~

28 ~~(vii) support regular visits with parents in the most natural setting possible, as well as trial home~~

visits with the child during any period of removal, consistent with the need to ensure the health, safety, and welfare of the child;

(viii) identify community resources, including housing, financial, transportation, mental health, substance abuse, and peer support services, and actively assist the parents or, when appropriate, the child's family in utilizing and accessing the resources;

(ix) monitor progress and participation in services; and

(x) consider alternative ways to address the needs of the parents and, when appropriate, the family if the optimum services do not exist or are not available.

(c) In determining preservation or reunification services to be provided and in making reasonable efforts at providing preservation or reunification services, the child's health and safety are of paramount concern.

(2) Except in a proceeding subject to the federal Indian Child Welfare Act [or the Montana Indian Child Welfare Act provided for in Title 41, chapter 3, part 13], the department may, at any time during an abuse and neglect proceeding, make a request for a determination that preservation or reunification services need not be provided. If an indigent parent is not already represented by counsel, the court shall immediately provide for the appointment or assignment of counsel to represent the indigent parent in accordance with the provisions of 41-3-425. A court may make a finding that the department need not make reasonable efforts to provide preservation or reunification services if the court finds that the parent has:

(a) subjected a child to aggravated circumstances, including but not limited to abandonment, torture, chronic abuse, or sexual abuse or chronic, severe neglect of a child;

(b) committed, aided, abetted, attempted, conspired, or solicited deliberate or mitigated deliberate homicide of a child;

(c) committed aggravated assault against a child;

(d) committed neglect of a child that resulted in serious bodily injury or death; or

(e) had parental rights to the child's sibling or other child of the parent involuntarily terminated and the circumstances related to the termination of parental rights are relevant to the parent's ability to adequately care for the child at issue.

(3) Preservation or reunification services are not required for a putative father, as defined in 42-2-

201, if the court makes a finding that the putative father has failed to do any of the following:

(a) ~~contribute to the support of the child for an aggregate period of 1 year, although able to do so;~~

(b) ~~establish a substantial relationship with the child. A substantial relationship is demonstrated by:~~

(i) ~~visiting the child at least monthly when physically and financially able to do so; or~~

(ii) ~~having regular contact with the child or with the person or agency having the care and custody of the child when physically and financially able to do so; and~~

(iii) ~~manifesting an ability and willingness to assume legal and physical custody of the child if the child was not in the physical custody of the other parent.~~

(c) ~~register with the putative father registry pursuant to Title 42, chapter 2, part 2, and the person has not been:~~

(i) ~~adjudicated in Montana to be the father of the child for the purposes of child support; or~~

(ii) ~~recorded on the child's birth certificate as the child's father.~~

(4) ~~A judicial finding that preservation or reunification services are not necessary under this section must be supported by clear and convincing evidence proof beyond a reasonable doubt.~~

(5) ~~If the court finds that preservation or reunification services are not necessary pursuant to subsection (2) or (3), a permanency hearing must be held within 30 days of that determination and reasonable efforts, including consideration of both in-state and out-of-state permanent placement options for the child, must be made to place the child in a timely manner in accordance with the permanency plan and to complete whatever steps are necessary to finalize the permanent placement of the child.~~

(6) ~~If reasonable efforts have been made to prevent removal of a child from the home or to return a child to the child's home but continuation of the efforts is determined by the court to be inconsistent with the permanency plan for the child, the department shall make reasonable efforts to place the child in a timely manner in accordance with the permanency plan, including, if appropriate, placement in another state, and to complete whatever steps are necessary to finalize the permanent placement of the child. Reasonable efforts to place a child permanently for adoption or to make an alternative out-of-home permanent placement may be made concurrently with reasonable efforts to return a child to the child's home. Concurrent planning, including identifying in-state and out-of-state placements, may be used.~~

(7) ~~When determining whether the department has made reasonable efforts to prevent the~~

~~necessity of removal of a child from the child's home or to reunify families that have been separated by the state, the court shall review the services provided by the agency including, if applicable, protective services provided pursuant to 41-3-302. (Bracketed language in subsection (2) terminates June 30, 2025—sec. 55, Ch. 716, L. 2023.)"~~

Section 3. Section 41-3-434, MCA, is amended to read:

"41-3-434. Stipulations—prohibition on continuances of hearings. (1) Subject to approval by the court, the parties may stipulate to any of the following:

(a) ~~the child meets the definition of a youth in need of care by the preponderance of the evidence clear and convincing evidence;~~

(b) ~~a treatment plan, if the child has been adjudicated a youth in need of care;~~

(c) ~~the disposition; or~~

(d) ~~extension of the timeframes contained in this chapter, except for the timeframe contained in 41-3-445.~~

(2) ~~(a) Unless the court determines that good cause or exigent circumstances exist, a hearing scheduled pursuant to this chapter may not be continued. If the court determines that good cause or exigent circumstances necessitate the continuance of a scheduled hearing, the court shall review the reasons for good cause or the exigency and order an appropriate remedy that considers the best interests of the child.~~

(b) ~~For the purposes of this subsection (2), "exigent circumstances" means:~~

(i) ~~newly discovered evidence;~~

(ii) ~~unforeseen personal emergencies; or~~

(iii) ~~other unforeseen emergencies or disasters.~~

(c) ~~For purposes of this subsection (2), "good cause" exists when:~~

(i) ~~a parent is progressing with recommended treatment or other services included in a court-approved treatment plan and would benefit from a reasonable amount of additional time to complete the identified tasks to achieve reunification with the child;~~

(ii) ~~additional time is necessary to meet the individual needs of a child, provide for the child's physical or emotional health, or to facilitate the child's permanency;~~

(iii) — continuation of a hearing is necessary to satisfy the procedural requirements of due process or effective representation; or

(iv) — the parties agree to a continuance."

Section 4. Section 41-3-437, MCA, is amended to read:

"41-3-437. (Temporary) Adjudication — temporary disposition — findings — order. (1) Upon the filing of an appropriate petition, an adjudicatory hearing must be held within 90 days of a show cause hearing under 41-3-432. Adjudication may take place at the show cause hearing if the requirements of subsection (2) are met or may be made by prior stipulation of the parties pursuant to 41-3-434 and order of the court.

Exceptions to the time limit may be allowed only in cases involving newly discovered evidence, unavoidable delays, stipulation by the parties pursuant to 41-3-434, and unforeseen personal emergencies.

(2) — The court may make an adjudication on a petition under 41-3-422 if the court determines by a preponderance of the evidence, except as provided in the federal Indian Child Welfare Act or the Montana Indian Child Welfare Act provided for in Title 41, chapter 3, part 13, if applicable, that the child is a youth in need of care. Except as otherwise provided in this part, the Montana Rules of Civil Procedure and the Montana Rules of Evidence apply to adjudication and to an adjudicatory hearing. Adjudication must determine the nature of the abuse and neglect and establish facts that resulted in state intervention and upon which disposition, case work, court review, and possible termination are based.

(3) — The court shall hear evidence regarding the residence of the child, paternity, if in question, the whereabouts of the parents, guardian, or nearest adult relative, and any other matters the court considers relevant in determining the status of the child. Hearsay evidence of statements made by the affected youth is admissible according to the Montana Rules of Evidence.

(4) — In a case in which abandonment has been alleged by the county attorney, the attorney general, or an attorney hired by the county, the court shall hear offered evidence, including evidence offered by a person appearing pursuant to 41-3-422(9)(a) or (9)(b), regarding any of the following subjects:

(a) — the extent to which the child has been cared for, nurtured, or supported by a person other than the child's parents; and

(b) — whether the child was placed or allowed to remain by the parents with another person for the

~~care of the child, and, if so, then the court shall accept evidence regarding:~~

~~(i) the intent of the parents in placing the child or allowing the child to remain with that person;~~

~~(ii) the continuity of care the person has offered the child by providing permanency or stability in residence, schooling, and activities outside of the home; and~~

~~(iii) the circumstances under which the child was placed or allowed to remain with that other person, including:~~

~~(A) whether a parent requesting return of the child was previously prevented from doing so as a result of an order issued pursuant to Title 40, chapter 15, part 2, or of a conviction pursuant to 45-5-206; and~~

~~(B) whether the child was originally placed with the other person to allow the parent to seek employment or attend school.~~

~~(5) In all civil and criminal proceedings relating to abuse or neglect, the privileges related to the examination or treatment of the child do not apply, except the attorney-client privilege granted by 26-1-803 and the mediation privilege granted by 26-1-813.~~

~~(6) (a) If the court determines that the child is not an abused or neglected child, the petition must be dismissed and any order made pursuant to 41-3-427 or 41-3-432 must be vacated.~~

~~(b) If the child is adjudicated a youth in need of care, the court shall set a date for a dispositional hearing to be conducted within 20 days, as provided in 41-3-438(1), and order any necessary or required investigations. The court may issue a temporary dispositional order pending the dispositional hearing. The temporary dispositional order may provide for any of the forms of relief listed in 41-3-427(2).~~

~~(7) (a) Before making an adjudication, the court may make oral findings, and following the adjudicatory hearing, the court shall make written findings on issues, including but not limited to the following:~~

~~(i) which allegations of the petition have been proved or admitted, if any;~~

~~(ii) whether there is a legal basis for continued court and department intervention; and~~

~~(iii) whether the department has made reasonable efforts to avoid protective placement of the child or to make it possible to safely return the child to the child's home.~~

~~(b) The court may order:~~

~~(i) terms for visitation, support, and other intrafamily communication pending disposition if the child is to be placed or to remain in temporary out-of-home care prior to disposition;~~

(ii) ~~examinations, evaluations, or counseling of the child or parents in preparation for the disposition hearing that does not require an expenditure of money by the department unless the court finds after notice and a hearing that the expenditure is reasonable and that resources are available for payment. The department is the payor of last resort after all family, insurance, and other resources have been examined.~~

(iii) ~~the department to evaluate the noncustodial parent or relatives as possible caretakers, if not already done;~~

(iv) ~~the perpetrator of the alleged child abuse or neglect to be removed from the home to allow the child to remain in the home; and~~

(v) ~~the department to continue efforts to notify noncustodial parents.~~

(8) ~~If a proceeding under this chapter involves an Indian child and is subject to the federal Indian Child Welfare Act or the Montana Indian Child Welfare Act, a qualified expert witness is required to testify that the continued custody of the Indian child by the parent or Indian custodian is likely to result in serious emotional or physical damage to the Indian child. (Terminates June 30, 2025 sec. 55, Ch. 716, L. 2023.)~~

41-3-437. (Effective July 1, 2025) Adjudication — temporary disposition — findings — order. (1)
~~Upon the filing of an appropriate petition, an adjudicatory hearing must be held within 90 days of a show cause hearing under 41-3-432. Adjudication may take place at the show cause hearing if the requirements of subsection (2) are met or may be made by prior stipulation of the parties pursuant to 41-3-434 and order of the court. Exceptions to the time limit may be allowed only in cases involving newly discovered evidence, unavoidable delays, stipulation by the parties pursuant to 41-3-434, and unforeseen personal emergencies.~~

(2) ~~The court may make an adjudication on a petition under 41-3-422 if the court determines by a preponderance of the evidence clear and convincing evidence, except as provided in the federal Indian Child Welfare Act, if applicable, that the child is a youth in need of care. Except as otherwise provided in this part, the Montana Rules of Civil Procedure and the Montana Rules of Evidence apply to adjudication and to an adjudicatory hearing. Adjudication must determine the nature of the abuse and neglect and establish facts that resulted in state intervention and upon which disposition, case work, court review, and possible termination are based.~~

(3) ~~The court shall hear evidence regarding the residence of the child, paternity, if in question, the whereabouts of the parents, guardian, or nearest adult relative, and any other matters the court considers~~

1 ~~relevant in determining the status of the child. Hearsay evidence of statements made by the affected youth is~~
2 ~~admissible according to the Montana Rules of Evidence.~~

3 ~~(4) — In a case in which abandonment has been alleged by the county attorney, the attorney general,~~
4 ~~or an attorney hired by the county, the court shall hear offered evidence, including evidence offered by a person~~
5 ~~appearing pursuant to 41-3-422(9)(a) or (9)(b), regarding any of the following subjects:~~

6 ~~(a) — the extent to which the child has been cared for, nurtured, or supported by a person other than~~
7 ~~the child's parents; and~~

8 ~~(b) — whether the child was placed or allowed to remain by the parents with another person for the~~
9 ~~care of the child, and, if so, then the court shall accept evidence regarding:~~

10 ~~(i) — the intent of the parents in placing the child or allowing the child to remain with that person;~~

11 ~~(ii) — the continuity of care the person has offered the child by providing permanency or stability in~~
12 ~~residence, schooling, and activities outside of the home; and~~

13 ~~(iii) — the circumstances under which the child was placed or allowed to remain with that other~~
14 ~~person, including:~~

15 ~~(A) — whether a parent requesting return of the child was previously prevented from doing so as a~~
16 ~~result of an order issued pursuant to Title 40, chapter 15, part 2, or of a conviction pursuant to 45-5-206; and~~

17 ~~(B) — whether the child was originally placed with the other person to allow the parent to seek~~
18 ~~employment or attend school.~~

19 ~~(5) — In all civil and criminal proceedings relating to abuse or neglect, the privileges related to the~~
20 ~~examination or treatment of the child do not apply, except the attorney-client privilege granted by 26-1-803 and~~
21 ~~the mediation privilege granted by 26-1-813.~~

22 ~~(6) — (a) If the court determines that the child is not an abused or neglected child, the petition must~~
23 ~~be dismissed and any order made pursuant to 41-3-427 or 41-3-432 must be vacated.~~

24 ~~(b) — If the child is adjudicated a youth in need of care, the court shall set a date for a dispositional~~
25 ~~hearing to be conducted within 20 days, as provided in 41-3-438(1), and order any necessary or required~~
26 ~~investigations. The court may issue a temporary dispositional order pending the dispositional hearing. The~~
27 ~~temporary dispositional order may provide for any of the forms of relief listed in 41-3-427(2).~~

28 ~~(7) — (a) Before making an adjudication, the court may make oral findings, and following the~~

adjudicatory hearing, the court shall make written findings on issues, including but not limited to the following:

(i) ~~which allegations of the petition have been proved or admitted, if any;~~

(ii) ~~whether there is a legal basis for continued court and department intervention; and~~

(iii) ~~whether the department has made reasonable efforts to avoid protective placement of the child or to make it possible to safely return the child to the child's home.~~

(b) ~~The court may order:~~

(i) ~~terms for visitation, support, and other intrafamily communication pending disposition if the child is to be placed or to remain in temporary out-of-home care prior to disposition;~~

(ii) ~~examinations, evaluations, or counseling of the child or parents in preparation for the disposition hearing that does not require an expenditure of money by the department unless the court finds after notice and a hearing that the expenditure is reasonable and that resources are available for payment. The department is the payor of last resort after all family, insurance, and other resources have been examined.~~

(iii) ~~the department to evaluate the noncustodial parent or relatives as possible caretakers, if not already done;~~

(iv) ~~the perpetrator of the alleged child abuse or neglect to be removed from the home to allow the child to remain in the home; and~~

(v) ~~the department to continue efforts to notify noncustodial parents.~~

(8) ~~If a proceeding under this chapter involves an Indian child and is subject to the federal Indian Child Welfare Act, a qualified expert witness is required to testify that the continued custody of the child by the parent or Indian custodian is likely to result in serious emotional or physical damage to the child."~~

Section 5. ~~Section 41-3-442, MCA, is amended to read:~~

"41-3-442. Temporary legal custody. ~~(1) If a child is found to be a youth in need of care under 41-3-437, the court may grant temporary legal custody under 41-3-438 if the court determines by a preponderance of the evidence clear and convincing evidence that:~~

(a) ~~dismissing the petition would create a substantial risk of harm to the child or would be a detriment to the child's physical or psychological well-being; and~~

(b) ~~unless there is a finding that reasonable efforts are not required pursuant to 41-3-423,~~

~~reasonable services have been provided to the parent or guardian to prevent the removal of the child from the home or to make it possible for the child to safely return home.~~

~~(2) — An order for temporary legal custody may be in effect for no longer than 6 months.~~

~~(3) — The granting of temporary legal custody to the department allows the department to place a child in care provided by a custodial or noncustodial parent, kinship foster home, youth foster home, youth group home, youth shelter care facility, or institution.~~

~~(4) — Before the expiration of the order for temporary legal custody, the county attorney, the attorney general, or an attorney hired by the county shall petition for one of the following:~~

~~(a) — an extension of temporary legal custody, not to exceed 6 months, upon a showing that:~~

~~(i) — additional time is necessary for the parent or guardian to successfully complete a treatment plan; or~~

~~(ii) — continuation of temporary legal custody is necessary because of the child's individual circumstances;~~

~~(b) — continued temporary placement of the child with the noncustodial parent, superseding any existing custodial order;~~

~~(c) — termination of the parent-child legal relationship and:~~

~~(i) — permanent legal custody with the right of adoption;~~

~~(ii) — permanent placement of the child with the noncustodial parent, superseding any existing custodial order; or~~

~~(iii) — appointment of a guardian pursuant to 41-3-607;~~

~~(d) — long-term custody when the child is in a planned permanent living arrangement pursuant to 41-3-445;~~

~~(e) — appointment of a guardian pursuant to 41-3-444; or~~

~~(f) — dismissal.~~

~~(5) — The court may continue an order for temporary legal custody pending a hearing on a petition provided for in subsection (2).~~

~~(6) — If an extension of temporary legal custody is granted to the department, the court shall state the reasons why the child was not returned home and the conditions upon which the child may be returned~~

~~home and shall specifically find that an extension is in the child's best interests.~~

~~(7) — If the time limitations of this section are not met, the court shall review the reasons for the failure and order an appropriate remedy that considers the best interests of the child.~~

~~(8) — In implementing the policy of this section, the child's health and safety are of paramount concern.~~

~~(9) — A petition requesting temporary legal custody must be served as provided in 41-3-422."~~

Section 6. Section 41-3-445, MCA, is amended to read:

~~"41-3-445. **Permanency hearing.** (1) (a) (i) Subject to subsection (1)(b), a permanency hearing must be held by the court or, subject to the approval of the court and absent an objection by a party to the proceeding, by the foster care review committee, as provided in 41-3-115, or the citizen review board, as provided in 41-3-1010:~~

~~(A) — within 30 days of a determination that reasonable efforts to provide preservation or reunification services are not necessary under 41-3-423, 41-3-438(6), or 41-3-442(1); or~~

~~(B) — no later than 12 months after the initial court finding that the child has been subjected to abuse or neglect or 12 months after the child's first 60 days of removal from the home, whichever comes first.~~

~~(ii) — Within 12 months of a hearing under subsection (1)(a)(i)(B) and every 12 months thereafter until the child is permanently placed in either an adoptive or a guardianship placement, the court or the court-approved entity holding the permanency hearing shall conduct a hearing and the court shall issue a finding as to whether the department has made reasonable efforts to finalize the permanency plan for the child.~~

~~(b) — A permanency hearing is not required if the proceeding has been dismissed, the child was not removed from the home, the child has been returned to the child's parent or guardian, or the child has been legally adopted or appointed a legal guardian.~~

~~(c) — The permanency hearing may be combined with a hearing that is required in other sections of this part or with a review held pursuant to 41-3-115 or 41-3-1010 if held within the applicable time limits. If a permanency hearing is combined with another hearing or a review, the requirements of the court related to the disposition of the other hearing or review must be met in addition to the requirements of this section.~~

~~(d) — The court-approved entity conducting the permanency hearing may elect to hold joint or~~

~~separate reviews for groups of siblings, but the court shall issue specific findings for each child.~~

~~(2) — At least 3 working days prior to the permanency hearing, the department shall submit a report regarding the child to the entity that will be conducting the hearing for review. The report must address the department's efforts to effectuate the permanency plan for the child, address the options for the child's permanent placement, examine the reasons for excluding higher priority options, and set forth the proposed plan to carry out the placement decision, including specific times for achieving the plan.~~

~~(3) — At least 3 working days prior to the permanency hearing, the guardian ad litem or an attorney or advocate for a parent or guardian may submit an informational report to the entity that will be conducting the hearing for review.~~

~~(4) — In a permanency hearing, the court or other entity conducting the hearing shall consult, in an age-appropriate manner, with the child regarding the proposed permanency or transition plan for the child.~~

~~(5) — (a) The court's order must be issued within 20 days after the permanency hearing if the hearing was conducted by the court.~~

~~(b) — If an entity other than the court conducts the hearing, the entity shall keep minutes of the hearing and the minutes and written recommendations must be provided to the court within 20 days of the hearing.~~

~~(c) — If an entity other than the court conducts the hearing and the court concurs with the recommendations, the court may adopt the recommendations as findings with no additional hearing required. In this case, the court shall issue written findings within 10 days of receipt of the written recommendations.~~

~~(6) — The court shall approve a specific permanency plan for the child and make written findings on:~~

~~(a) — whether the child has been asked about the desired permanency outcome;~~

~~(b) — whether the permanency plan is in the best interests of the child;~~

~~(c) — whether the department has made reasonable efforts to effectuate the permanency plan for the individual child;~~

~~(d) — whether the department has made reasonable efforts to finalize the plan;~~

~~(e) — whether there are compelling reasons why it is not in the best interest of the individual child to:~~

~~(i) — return to the child's home; or~~

~~(ii) — be placed for adoption, with a legal guardian, or with a fit and willing relative; and~~

(f) ~~other necessary steps that the department is required to take to effectuate the terms of the plan.~~

(7) ~~In its discretion, the court may enter any other order that it determines to be in the best interests of the child that does not conflict with the options provided in subsection (8) and that does not require an expenditure of money by the department unless the court finds after notice and a hearing that the expenditures are reasonable and that resources are available for payment. The department is the payor of last resort after all family, insurance, and other resources have been examined.~~

(8) ~~Permanency options include:~~

(a) ~~reunification of the child with the child's parent or guardian;~~

(b) ~~permanent placement of the child with the noncustodial parent, superseding any existing custodial order;~~

(c) ~~adoption;~~

(d) ~~appointment of a guardian pursuant to 41-3-444; or~~

(e) ~~long-term custody if the child is in a planned permanent living arrangement and if it is established by a preponderance of the evidence clear and convincing evidence, which is reflected in specific findings by the court, that:~~

(i) ~~the child is being cared for by a fit and willing relative;~~

(ii) ~~the child has an emotional or mental handicap that is so severe that the child cannot function in a family setting and the best interests of the child are served by placement in a residential or group setting;~~

(iii) ~~the child is at least 16 years of age and is participating in an independent living program and that termination of parental rights is not in the best interests of the child;~~

(iv) ~~the child's parent is incarcerated and circumstances, including placement of the child and continued, frequent contact with the parent, indicate that it would not be in the best interests of the child to terminate parental rights of that parent; or~~

(v) ~~the child meets the following criteria:~~

(A) ~~the child has been adjudicated a youth in need of care;~~

(B) ~~the department has made reasonable efforts to reunite the parent and child, further efforts by the department would likely be unproductive, and reunification of the child with the parent or guardian would be~~

~~contrary to the best interests of the child;~~

~~(C) — there is a judicial finding that other more permanent placement options for the child have been considered and found to be inappropriate or not to be in the best interests of the child; and~~

~~(D) — the child has been in a placement in which the foster parent or relative has committed to the long-term care and to a relationship with the child, and it is in the best interests of the child to remain in that placement.~~

~~(9) — For a child 14 years of age or older, the permanency plan must:~~

~~(a) — be developed in consultation with the child and in consultation with up to two members of the child's case planning team who are chosen by the child and who are not a foster parent or child protection specialist for the child;~~

~~(b) — identify one person from the case management team, who is selected by the child, to be designated as the child's advisor and advocate for the application of the reasonable and prudent parenting standard; and~~

~~(c) — include services that will be needed to transition the child from foster care to adulthood.~~

~~(10) — A permanency hearing must document the intensive, ongoing, and unsuccessful efforts made by the department to return the child to the child's home or to secure a permanent placement of the child with a relative, legal guardian, or adoptive parent.~~

~~(11) — The court may terminate a planned permanent living arrangement upon petition of the birth parents or the department if the court finds that the circumstances of the child or family have substantially changed and the best interests of the child are no longer being served."~~

Section 2. Section 41-3-609, MCA, is amended to read:

~~"41-3-609. (Temporary) Criteria for termination. (1) The court may order a termination of the parent-child legal relationship upon a finding established by clear and convincing evidence, except as provided in the federal Indian Child Welfare Act or the Montana Indian Child Welfare Act provided for in Title 41, chapter 3, part 13, if applicable, that any of the following circumstances exist:~~

~~(a) — the parents have relinquished the child pursuant to 42-2-402 and 42-2-412;~~

~~(b) — the child has been abandoned by the parents;~~