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## **Governor Parson signs bill aimed at addressing abuse in unlicensed youth residential facilities**

JEFFERSON CITY (July 14, 2021): Missouri KidsFirst is pleased to announce that today Governor Parson signed the historic “Residential Care Facility Notification Act” (House Bill 557) into law. HB 557 creates safeguards for children living in unlicensed boarding schools.

Sponsored by Representatives Rudy Veit (R-Wardsville) and Keri Ingle (D-Lee's Summit), HB 557 ends Missouri’s status as one of only two states without any regulation of youth residential facilities. Lack of oversight of these facilities in Missouri has been an issue of concern for child advocates for decades. Over the years, horrific cases have come to light of sexual, physical and emotional abuse happening in these unlicensed boarding schools, prompting numerous calls for action. However, the last time the legislature tried unsuccessfully to related legislation was over twenty years ago.

“This law closes a loophole in our child protection system that had gone unaddressed for decades,” said Jessica Seitz, Interim Executive Director of Missouri KidsFirst. “HB 557 provides minimum protections for children living in unlicensed residential facilities to help keep them safe and to ensure that predators are not shielded due to lack of oversight. The signing of this bill means that our state will no longer be a haven for people who harm children.”

There are three main issues HB 557 addresses:

- **NOTIFICATION: Knowing where these residential care facilities are.** Currently, these facilities are allowed to operate in darkness. There is no centralized way to collect and house information and no state agency has oversight authority. Under the new law, facilities will be required to register with the state and the Department of Social Services will maintain a registry.
- **SAFETY CHECKS: Requiring facilities to meet minimal health and safety standards, including background checks and allowing regulators to check the safety and well-being of children.** HB 557 also allows the Children’s Division to petition the court for an order directing a facility to present a child subject to an abuse and neglect investigation, and any other children living in the facility if they are suspected to be in danger, for an assessment of a child’s health, safety and well-being.

*Missouri KidsFirst is an Accredited Chapter of the National Children’s Alliance  
and the Missouri Chapter of Prevent Child Abuse America*

- **AUTHORITY TO CLOSE FACILITIES FOR NON-COMPLIANCE: Establishing a mechanism to shut these facilities down if they fail to comply with the minimum notification requirements.** Under HB 557, failure to comply with the law—operating without notification—could ultimately result in the removal of children or a facility being shut down. This shall only be initiated if the facility is providing care without notification, failing to comply with minimum standards including background checks or an immediate health, safety or welfare concern for the children at the facility

“Missouri KidsFirst extends special thanks to Missouri Representatives Rudy Veit and Keri Ingle and Senator Bill White for their steadfast leadership this year,” said Seitz. “We also thank the courageous survivors who shared their stories, forcing the hand of lawmakers; their advocacy shined a light on a broken system and resulted in passage of a law that was long overdue.”

HB 557 also contained an emergency clause, making it effective immediately.

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#### **About Missouri KidsFirst**

Founded in 2002, Missouri KidsFirst is the state chapter of Missouri’s fifteen accredited regional Child Advocacy Centers (CACs) and the seat of Prevent Child Abuse Missouri. Missouri KidsFirst works to empower adults—including policymakers, children’s advocacy centers, law enforcement, Children’s Division employees, prosecutors and medical providers—to protect children from abuse by providing leadership, training, technical assistance, and legislative and public policy advocacy across the state.