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**SUBSTITUTE HOUSE BILL 1938**

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**State of Washington**

**61st Legislature**

**2009 Regular Session**

**By** House Early Learning & Children's Services (originally sponsored by Representatives Roberts, Kagi, Angel, Walsh, Dunshee, Pettigrew, Green, Goodman, Haler, and Kenney)

READ FIRST TIME 02/23/09.

1           AN ACT Relating to children's interests in maintaining postadoption  
2 contact with their siblings; amending RCW 26.33.295 and 26.33.190;  
3 reenacting and amending RCW 13.34.136; and adding new sections to  
4 chapter 26.33 RCW.

5 BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

6           NEW SECTION.   **Sec. 1.** A new section is added to chapter 26.33 RCW  
7 to read as follows:

8           The legislature finds that the importance of children's  
9 relationships with their siblings is well recognized in law and  
10 science. The bonds between siblings are often irreplaceable, leading  
11 some experts to believe that sibling relationships can be longer  
12 lasting and more influential than any other over a person's lifetime.  
13 For children who have been removed from home due to abuse or neglect,  
14 these bonds are often much stronger because siblings have learned early  
15 the importance of depending on one another and cooperating in order to  
16 cope with their common problems. The legislature further finds that  
17 when children are in the foster care system they typically have some  
18 degree of contact or visitation with their siblings even when they are  
19 not living together. The legislature finds, however, that when one or

1 more of the siblings is adopted from foster care, these relationships  
2 may be severed completely if an open adoption agreement fails to attend  
3 to the needs of the siblings for continuing postadoption contact. The  
4 legislature intends to promote a greater focus, in permanency planning  
5 and adoption proceedings, on the interests of siblings separated by  
6 adoptive placements and to encourage the inclusion in adoption  
7 agreements of provisions to support ongoing postadoption contact  
8 between siblings.

9 NEW SECTION. **Sec. 2.** A new section is added to chapter 26.33 RCW  
10 to read as follows:

11 The court, in reviewing and approving an agreement under RCW  
12 26.33.295 for the adoption of a child from foster care, shall encourage  
13 the adoptive parents, birth parents, foster parents, kinship  
14 caregivers, and the department or other supervising agency to seriously  
15 consider the long-term benefits to the child adoptee and siblings of  
16 the child adoptee of providing for and facilitating continuing  
17 postadoption contact between siblings. To the extent feasible, and  
18 when in the best interests of the child adoptee and siblings of the  
19 child adoptee, contact between the siblings should be frequent and of  
20 a similar nature as that which existed prior to the adoption. If the  
21 child adoptee or known siblings of the child adoptee are represented by  
22 an attorney or guardian ad litem in a proceeding under this chapter or  
23 in any other child custody proceeding, the court shall inquire of each  
24 attorney and guardian ad litem regarding the potential benefits of  
25 continuing contact between the siblings and the potential detriments of  
26 severing contact.

27 **Sec. 3.** RCW 26.33.295 and 1990 c 285 s 4 are each amended to read  
28 as follows:

29 (1) Nothing in this chapter shall be construed to prohibit the  
30 parties to a proceeding under this chapter from entering into  
31 agreements regarding communication with or contact between child  
32 adoptees, adoptive parents, siblings of child adoptees, and a birth  
33 parent or parents.

34 (2) Agreements regarding communication with or contact between  
35 child adoptees, adoptive parents, siblings of child adoptees, and a  
36 birth parent or parents shall not be legally enforceable unless the

1 terms of the agreement are set forth in a written court order entered  
2 in accordance with the provisions of this section. The court shall not  
3 enter a proposed order unless the terms of such order have been  
4 approved in writing by the prospective adoptive parents, any birth  
5 parent whose parental rights have not previously been terminated, and,  
6 if the child (~~is~~) or siblings of the child are in the custody of the  
7 department or a licensed child-placing agency, a representative of the  
8 department or child-placing agency. If the child is represented by an  
9 attorney or guardian ad litem in a proceeding under this chapter or in  
10 any other child-custody proceeding, the terms of the proposed order  
11 also must be approved in writing by the child's representative. An  
12 agreement under this section need not disclose the identity of the  
13 parties to be legally enforceable. The court shall not enter a  
14 proposed order unless the court finds that the communication or contact  
15 (~~between~~) with the child adoptee, (~~the adoptive parents, and a birth~~  
16 ~~parent or parents~~) as agreed upon and as set forth in the proposed  
17 order, would be in the child adoptee's best interests.

18 (3) Failure to comply with the terms of an agreed order regarding  
19 communication or contact that has been entered by the court pursuant to  
20 this section shall not be grounds for setting aside an adoption decree  
21 or revocation of a written consent to an adoption after that consent  
22 has been approved by the court as provided in this chapter.

23 (4) An agreed order entered pursuant to this section may be  
24 enforced by a civil action and the prevailing party in that action may  
25 be awarded, as part of the costs of the action, a reasonable amount to  
26 be fixed by the court as attorneys' fees. The court shall not modify  
27 an agreed order under this section unless it finds that the  
28 modification is necessary to serve the best interests of the child  
29 adoptee, and that: (a) The modification is agreed to by the adoptive  
30 parent and the birth parent or parents; or (b) exceptional  
31 circumstances have arisen since the agreed order was entered that  
32 justify modification of the order.

33 **Sec. 4.** RCW 26.33.190 and 2007 c 387 s 2 are each amended to read  
34 as follows:

35 (1) Any person may at any time request an agency, the department,  
36 an individual approved by the court, or a qualified salaried court  
37 employee to prepare a preplacement report. A certificate signed under

1 penalty of perjury by the person preparing the report specifying his or  
2 her qualifications as required in this chapter shall be attached to or  
3 filed with each preplacement report and shall include a statement of  
4 training or experience that qualifies the person preparing the report  
5 to discuss relevant adoption issues. A person may have more than one  
6 preplacement report prepared. All preplacement reports shall be filed  
7 with the court in which the petition for adoption is filed.

8 (2) The preplacement report shall be a written document setting  
9 forth all relevant information relating to the fitness of the person  
10 requesting the report as an adoptive parent. The report shall be based  
11 on a study which shall include an investigation of the home  
12 environment, family life, health, facilities, and resources of the  
13 person requesting the report. The report shall include a list of the  
14 sources of information on which the report is based. The report shall  
15 include a recommendation as to the fitness of the person requesting the  
16 report to be an adoptive parent. The report shall also verify that the  
17 following issues were discussed with the prospective adoptive parents:

18 (a) The concept of adoption as a lifelong developmental process and  
19 commitment;

20 (b) The potential for the child to have feelings of identity  
21 confusion and loss regarding separation from the birth parents;

22 (c) If applicable, the relevance of the child's relationship with  
23 siblings and the potential benefit to the child of providing for a  
24 continuing relationship and contact between the child and known  
25 siblings;

26 (d) Disclosure of the fact of adoption to the child;

27 ~~((d))~~ (e) The child's possible questions about birth parents and  
28 relatives; and

29 ~~((e))~~ (f) The relevance of the child's racial, ethnic, and  
30 cultural heritage.

31 (3) All preplacement reports shall include a background check of  
32 any conviction records, pending charges, or disciplinary board final  
33 decisions of prospective adoptive parents. The background check shall  
34 include an examination of state and national criminal identification  
35 data provided by the Washington state patrol criminal identification  
36 system including, but not limited to, a fingerprint-based background  
37 check of national crime information databases for any person being  
38 investigated. It shall also include a review of any child abuse and

1 neglect history of any adult living in the prospective adoptive  
2 parents' home. The background check of the child abuse and neglect  
3 history shall include a review of the child abuse and neglect  
4 registries of all states in which the prospective adoptive parents or  
5 any other adult living in the home have lived during the five years  
6 preceding the date of the preplacement report.

7 (4) An agency, the department, or a court approved individual may  
8 charge a reasonable fee based on the time spent in conducting the study  
9 and preparing the preplacement report. The court may set a reasonable  
10 fee for conducting the study and preparing the report when a court  
11 employee has prepared the report. An agency, the department, a court  
12 approved individual, or the court may reduce or waive the fee if the  
13 financial condition of the person requesting the report so warrants.  
14 An agency's, the department's, or court approved individual's, fee is  
15 subject to review by the court upon request of the person requesting  
16 the report.

17 (5) The person requesting the report shall designate to the agency,  
18 the department, the court approved individual, or the court in writing  
19 the county in which the preplacement report is to be filed. If the  
20 person requesting the report has not filed a petition for adoption, the  
21 report shall be indexed in the name of the person requesting the report  
22 and a cause number shall be assigned. A fee shall not be charged for  
23 filing the report. The applicable filing fee may be charged at the  
24 time a petition governed by this chapter is filed. Any subsequent  
25 preplacement reports shall be filed together with the original report.

26 (6) A copy of the completed preplacement report shall be delivered  
27 to the person requesting the report.

28 (7) A person may request that a report not be completed. A  
29 reasonable fee may be charged for the value of work done.

30 **Sec. 5.** RCW 13.34.136 and 2008 c 267 s 3 and 2008 c 152 s 2 are  
31 each reenacted and amended to read as follows:

32 (1) Whenever a child is ordered removed from the home, a permanency  
33 plan shall be developed no later than sixty days from the time the  
34 supervising agency assumes responsibility for providing services,  
35 including placing the child, or at the time of a hearing under RCW  
36 13.34.130, whichever occurs first. The permanency planning process

1 continues until a permanency planning goal is achieved or dependency is  
2 dismissed. The planning process shall include reasonable efforts to  
3 return the child to the parent's home.

4 (2) The agency supervising the dependency shall submit a written  
5 permanency plan to all parties and the court not less than fourteen  
6 days prior to the scheduled hearing. Responsive reports of parties not  
7 in agreement with the supervising agency's proposed permanency plan  
8 must be provided to the supervising agency, all other parties, and the  
9 court at least seven days prior to the hearing.

10 The permanency plan shall include:

11 (a) A permanency plan of care that shall identify one of the  
12 following outcomes as a primary goal and may identify additional  
13 outcomes as alternative goals: Return of the child to the home of the  
14 child's parent, guardian, or legal custodian; adoption; guardianship;  
15 permanent legal custody; long-term relative or foster care, until the  
16 child is age eighteen, with a written agreement between the parties and  
17 the care provider; successful completion of a responsible living skills  
18 program; or independent living, if appropriate and if the child is age  
19 sixteen or older. The department shall not discharge a child to an  
20 independent living situation before the child is eighteen years of age  
21 unless the child becomes emancipated pursuant to chapter 13.64 RCW;

22 (b) Unless the court has ordered, pursuant to RCW 13.34.130(5),  
23 that a termination petition be filed, a specific plan as to where the  
24 child will be placed, what steps will be taken to return the child  
25 home, what steps the agency will take to promote existing appropriate  
26 sibling relationships and/or facilitate placement together or contact  
27 in accordance with the best interests of each child, and what actions  
28 the agency will take to maintain parent-child ties. All aspects of the  
29 plan shall include the goal of achieving permanence for the child.

30 (i) The agency plan shall specify what services the parents will be  
31 offered to enable them to resume custody, what requirements the parents  
32 must meet to resume custody, and a time limit for each service plan and  
33 parental requirement.

34 (ii) Visitation is the right of the family, including the child and  
35 the parent, in cases in which visitation is in the best interest of the  
36 child. Early, consistent, and frequent visitation is crucial for  
37 maintaining parent-child relationships and making it possible for  
38 parents and children to safely reunify. The agency shall encourage the

1 maximum parent and child and sibling contact possible, when it is in  
2 the best interest of the child, including regular visitation and  
3 participation by the parents in the care of the child while the child  
4 is in placement. Visitation shall not be limited as a sanction for a  
5 parent's failure to comply with court orders or services where the  
6 health, safety, or welfare of the child is not at risk as a result of  
7 the visitation. Visitation may be limited or denied only if the court  
8 determines that such limitation or denial is necessary to protect the  
9 child's health, safety, or welfare. The court and the agency should  
10 rely upon community resources, relatives, foster parents, and other  
11 appropriate persons to provide transportation and supervision for  
12 visitation to the extent that such resources are available, and  
13 appropriate, and the child's safety would not be compromised.

14 (iii) A child shall be placed as close to the child's home as  
15 possible, preferably in the child's own neighborhood, unless the court  
16 finds that placement at a greater distance is necessary to promote the  
17 child's or parents' well-being.

18 (iv) The plan shall state whether both in-state and, where  
19 appropriate, out-of-state placement options have been considered by the  
20 department.

21 (v) Unless it is not in the best interests of the child, whenever  
22 practical, the plan should ensure the child remains enrolled in the  
23 school the child was attending at the time the child entered foster  
24 care.

25 (vi) The agency charged with supervising a child in placement shall  
26 provide all reasonable services that are available within the agency,  
27 or within the community, or those services which the department has  
28 existing contracts to purchase. It shall report to the court if it is  
29 unable to provide such services; and

30 (c) If the court has ordered, pursuant to RCW 13.34.130(5), that a  
31 termination petition be filed, a specific plan as to where the child  
32 will be placed, what steps will be taken to achieve permanency for the  
33 child, services to be offered or provided to the child, and, if  
34 visitation would be in the best interests of the child, a  
35 recommendation to the court regarding visitation between parent and  
36 child pending a fact-finding hearing on the termination petition. The  
37 agency shall not be required to develop a plan of services for the  
38 parents or provide services to the parents if the court orders a

1 termination petition be filed. However, reasonable efforts to ensure  
2 visitation and contact between siblings shall be made unless there is  
3 reasonable cause to believe the best interests of the child or siblings  
4 would be jeopardized.

5 (3) Permanency planning goals should be achieved at the earliest  
6 possible date. If the child has been in out-of-home care for fifteen  
7 of the most recent twenty-two months, the court shall require the  
8 department to file a petition seeking termination of parental rights in  
9 accordance with RCW 13.34.145(3)(b)(vi). In cases where parental  
10 rights have been terminated, the child is legally free for adoption,  
11 and adoption has been identified as the primary permanency planning  
12 goal, it shall be a goal to complete the adoption within six months  
13 following entry of the termination order.

14 (4) If the court determines that the continuation of reasonable  
15 efforts to prevent or eliminate the need to remove the child from his  
16 or her home or to safely return the child home should not be part of  
17 the permanency plan of care for the child, reasonable efforts shall be  
18 made to place the child in a timely manner and to complete whatever  
19 steps are necessary to finalize the permanent placement of the child.

20 (5) The identified outcomes and goals of the permanency plan may  
21 change over time based upon the circumstances of the particular case.

22 (6) The court shall consider the child's relationships with the  
23 child's siblings in accordance with RCW 13.34.130(3). Whenever the  
24 permanency plan for a child is adoption, the court shall encourage the  
25 prospective adoptive parents, birth parents, foster parents, kinship  
26 caregivers, and the department or other supervising agency to seriously  
27 consider the long-term benefits to the child adoptee and his or her  
28 siblings of providing for and facilitating continuing postadoption  
29 contact between the siblings. To the extent that it is feasible, and  
30 when it is in the best interests of the child adoptee and his or her  
31 siblings, contact between the siblings should be frequent and of a  
32 similar nature as that which existed prior to the adoption. If the  
33 child adoptee or his or her siblings are represented by an attorney or  
34 guardian ad litem in a proceeding under this chapter or in any other  
35 child custody proceeding, the court shall inquire of each attorney and  
36 guardian ad litem regarding the potential benefits of continuing  
37 contact between the siblings and the potential detriments of severing  
38 contact.



1 (7) For purposes related to permanency planning:

2 (a) "Guardianship" means a dependency guardianship or a legal  
3 guardianship pursuant to chapter 11.88 RCW or equivalent laws of  
4 another state or a federally recognized Indian tribe.

5 (b) "Permanent custody order" means a custody order entered  
6 pursuant to chapter 26.10 RCW.

7 (c) "Permanent legal custody" means legal custody pursuant to  
8 chapter 26.10 RCW or equivalent laws of another state or a federally  
9 recognized Indian tribe.

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