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**SENATE BILL 6422**

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**State of Washington 66th Legislature 2020 Regular Session**

**By** Senators Darneille, Zeiger, Dhingra, Frockt, Walsh, Wilson, C., Kuderer, Hasegawa, Hunt, Nguyen, Das, and Saldaña

AN ACT Relating to establishing the family connections program; amending RCW 2.70.060, 2.70.070, 2.70.080, 2.70.090, and 74.13.802; adding a new section to chapter 74.13 RCW; creating a new section; and providing an expiration date.

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

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  (1) The legislature recognizes that the department of children, youth, and families is working to change the culture of foster care and transition to a prevention-based child welfare system. The family first prevention services act will help facilitate this transition by allowing states to use federal funds for preventative services.

(2) To successfully prevent future child abuse and neglect from occurring, and minimize the impact of removal, the department should help facilitate relationships between foster families and birth parents through creation of the family connections program to strengthen families and prevent future child trauma. The legislature intends that the family connections program will put the child first, work to reduce family trauma, and support the child by helping adults learn, share, and work on understanding how best to support the child together.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 74.13 RCW to read as follows:

(1) Beginning September 1, 2020, the department shall contract with an external organization or organizations with experience serving youth or families receiving out-of-home care services to implement and operate the family connections program, which facilitates interaction between a parent of a child found to be dependent pursuant to chapter 13.34 RCW and in out-of-home care and the individual with whom the child is placed.

(2) The external organization or organizations contracted to implement and operate the family connections program shall implement and operate the family connections program in one location west of the crest of the Cascade mountains, and one location east of the crest of the Cascade mountains.

(3) Families may be referred to the family connections program by a caseworker, an attorney, a guardian ad litem as defined in RCW 13.34.030, a parent ally, an office of public defense social worker, or the court.

(4) After receiving a referral, the family connections program shall determine whether an in-person meeting between a parent of a child found to be dependent pursuant to chapter 13.34 RCW and in out-of-home care and the individual with whom the child is placed is appropriate. If the family connections program determines that such a meeting is appropriate, the family connections program shall then determine whether:

(a) The parent of a child found to be dependent pursuant to chapter 13.34 RCW and in out-of-home care and the individual with whom the child is placed are willing to participate in an in-person meeting; and

(b) Safety concerns exist such that an in-person meeting should not occur.

(5) If the family connections program determines that an in-person meeting should occur following the analysis required by subsection (4) of this section, the family connections program shall provide a referral to the family connections program team. The family connections program team shall include a parent ally and an experienced caregiver. After receiving a referral, the family connections program team shall:

(a) Ensure that the parent ally contact the parent to prepare for an in-person meeting between the parent and caregiver;

(b) Ensure that the experienced caregiver contact the caregiver to prepare for an in-person meeting between the parent and caregiver;

(c) Convene an in-person meeting between the parent and caregiver; and

(d) Provide ongoing support to the parent and caregiver following the in-person meeting.

(6) If the family connections program determines that an in-person meeting should not occur following the analysis required under subsection (4) of this section, the family connections program team shall facilitate the exchange of information between the parent and caregiver in an appropriate manner that does not include an in-person meeting. The format of this exchange of information may include written messages, phone calls, or videoconferencing. The family connections program shall routinely reevaluate whether an in-person meeting should occur using the analysis required under subsection (4) of this section.

(7) The department shall collect data and measure outcomes for families engaging in the family connections program. By September 1, 2021, and in compliance with RCW 43.01.036, the department shall submit a report to the relevant committees of the legislature that details:

(a) Data collected for the family connections program;

(b) Outcomes for families engaging in the family connections program; and

(c) The department's plan on how to expand the family connections program statewide.

(8) The definitions in this subsection apply throughout this section:

(a) "Experienced caregiver" means:

(i) An individual who is or has received a foster-family home license pursuant to chapter 74.15 RCW or an equivalent license from another state; or

(ii) An individual who cared for a child who was removed from his or her parent pursuant to chapter 13.34 RCW and who has a kin relationship to that child pursuant to RCW 74.13.600.

(b) "Parent ally" has the same meaning as provided in RCW 2.70.060.

(9) This section expires June 30, 2022.

**Sec.**  RCW 2.70.060 and 2015 c 117 s 2 are each amended to read as follows:

For the purposes of RCW 2.70.070 through ((~~2.70.100~~)) 2.70.090, "((~~child welfare~~)) parent ((~~mentor~~)) ally" means a parent who has successfully resolved the issues that led the parent's child into the care of the juvenile dependency court system, resulting in family reunification or another permanency outcome, and who has an interest in working collaboratively to improve the lives of children and families.

**Sec.**  RCW 2.70.070 and 2015 c 117 s 3 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) The goal of the parents for parents program is to increase the permanency and well-being of children in foster care through peer mentoring that increases parental engagement and contributes to family reunification.

(2) The parents for parents program may provide structured peer mentoring for families entering the dependency court system, administered by ((~~child welfare~~)) parent ((~~mentors~~)) allies.

**Sec.**  RCW 2.70.080 and 2015 c 117 s 4 are each amended to read as follows:

Subject to the availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose, components of the parents for parents program, provided by ((~~child welfare~~)) parent ((~~mentors~~)) allies, may include:

(1) Outreach and support to parents at dependency-related hearings, beginning with the shelter care hearing;

(2) A class that educates parents about the dependency system they must navigate in order to have their children returned, empowers them with tools and resources they need to be successful with their case plan, and provides information that helps them understand and support the needs of their children;

(3) Ongoing individual peer support to help parents involved with the child welfare system;

(4) Structured, curriculum-based peer support groups.

**Sec.**  RCW 2.70.090 and 2018 c 58 s 66 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) Subject to the availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose, the parents for parents program shall be funded through the office of public defense and centrally administered through a pass-through to a Washington state nonprofit-lead organization that has extensive experience supporting ((~~child welfare~~)) parent ((~~mentors~~)) allies.

(2) Through the contract with the lead organization, each local program must be locally administered by the county superior court or a nonprofit organization that shall serve as the host organization.

(3) Local stakeholders representing key child welfare systems shall serve as parents for parents program advisors. Examples of local stakeholders include the department of children, youth, and families, the superior court, attorneys for the parents, assistant attorneys general, and court-appointed special advocates or guardians ad litem.

(4) A ((~~child welfare~~)) parent ((~~mentor~~)) ally lead shall provide program coordination and maintain local program information.

(5) The lead organization shall provide ongoing training to the host organizations, statewide program oversight and coordination, and maintain statewide program information.

**Sec.**  RCW 74.13.802 and 2019 c 328 s 1 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) Beginning July 1, 2020, the department shall establish a child welfare housing assistance pilot program, which provides housing vouchers, rental assistance, navigation, and other support services to eligible families.

(a) The department shall operate or contract for the operation of the child welfare housing assistance pilot program under subsection (3) of this section in one county west of the crest of the Cascade mountain range and one county east of the crest of the Cascade mountain range.

(b) The child welfare housing assistance pilot program is intended to shorten the time that children remain in out-of-home care.

(2) A parent with a child who is dependent pursuant to chapter 13.34 RCW and whose primary remaining barrier to reunification is the lack of appropriate housing is eligible for the child welfare housing assistance pilot program.

(3) The department shall contract with an outside entity or entities to operate the child welfare housing assistance pilot program. If no outside entity or entities are available to operate the program or specific parts of the program, the department may operate the program or the specific parts that are not operated by an outside entity.

(4) Families may be referred to the child welfare housing assistance pilot program by a caseworker, an attorney, a guardian ad litem as defined in chapter 13.34 RCW, a ((~~child welfare~~)) parent ((~~mentor~~)) ally as defined in RCW 2.70.060, an office of public defense social worker, or the court.

(5) The department shall consult with a stakeholder group that must include, but is not limited to, the following:

(a) Parent allies;

(b) Parent attorneys and social workers managed by the office of public defense parent representation program;

(c) The department of commerce;

(d) Housing experts;

(e) Community-based organizations;

(f) Advocates; and

(g) Behavioral health providers.

(6) The stakeholder group established in subsection (5) of this section shall begin meeting after July 28, 2019, and assist the department in design of the child welfare housing assistance pilot program in areas including, but not limited to:

(a) Equitable racial, geographic, ethnic, and gender distribution of program support;

(b) Eligibility criteria;

(c) Creating a definition of homeless for purposes of eligibility for the program; and

(d) Options for program design that include outside entities operating the entire program or specific parts of the program.

(7) By December 1, 2021, the department shall report outcomes for the child welfare housing assistance pilot program to the oversight board for children, youth, and families established pursuant to RCW 43.216.015. The report must include racial, geographic, ethnic, and gender distribution of program support.

(8) The child welfare housing assistance pilot program established in this section is subject to the availability of funds appropriated for this purpose.

(9) This section expires June 30, 2022.

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