

SENATE BILL REPORT

SHB 2525

As Reported by Senate Committee On:
Human Services, Reentry & Rehabilitation, February 20, 2020

Title: An act relating to establishing the family connections program.

Brief Description: Establishing the family connections program.

Sponsors: House Committee on Human Services & Early Learning (originally sponsored by Representatives Callan, Corry, Eslick, Springer, Orwall, Ortiz-Self, Shewmake, Goodman, Senn, Caldier, Dent, Leavitt, Davis, Doglio, J. Johnson and Pollet).

Brief History: Passed House: 2/13/20, 97-0.

Committee Activity: Human Services, Reentry & Rehabilitation: 2/20/20, 2/20/20 [DP-WM].

Brief Summary of Bill

- Creates the Family Connections Program to strengthen families and prevent future child trauma by facilitating communication, where appropriate, between foster families and birth families when a child is dependent and in out-of-home placement.
- Defines experienced caregiver and parent ally.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES, REENTRY & REHABILITATION

Majority Report: Do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators Darneille, Chair; Nguyen, Vice Chair; Cleveland, O'Ban, Wilson, C. and Zeiger.

Staff: Alison Mendiola (786-7488)

Background: Child Welfare. If an individual suspects a child has been abused or neglected, that abuse or neglect can be reported to the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF's) Child Protective Services (CPS) office or to law enforcement. There are many individuals required by law to report suspected abuse or neglect. CPS will determine whether the report of child abuse or neglect is credible and whether the report meets the sufficiency screening criteria. If the report meets the screening criteria, CPS will assign

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either a 24-hour response that includes an investigation; or a family assessment response for low- to moderate-risk allegations that requires a 72-hour response. DCYF, or anyone else, can file a court petition alleging the child should be a dependent of the state due to abuse, neglect, or because no parent, guardian, or custodian is capable of adequately caring for the child. A court will hold a shelter care hearing following removal of a child from the child's home within 72 hours. At this hearing, the court will determine if the child can return home safely.

Out-of-Home Care. When children are removed from the home of a parent or guardian due to allegations of abuse or neglect, those children may be placed with relatives or in foster care. Relatives care for almost half of the children placed in out-of-home care and are required to meet certain safety requirements, but are not required to be licensed. Foster parents may pursue licensure by either DCYF or private child-placing agencies and provide temporary care to children with the goal of reunifying the child with the child's parent or guardian.

Parents for Parents Program. The Parents for Parents Program (Program) was created to increase the number of family reunifications, where appropriate, while decreasing the length of time needed to establish permanence. The Program was adopted and expanded by the Legislature in 2015 and provides peer mentoring for families in the dependency court system increasing parental engagement, and contributes to family reunification. The Program's outreach and support to parents begins at the shelter care hearing and is provided by a child welfare parent mentor who has successfully navigated the juvenile dependency court system.

Under the Program a "child welfare parent mentor" 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.

The Program is currently active in the following 14 counties: Benton and Franklin County—Safe Harbor, Clallam County—Clallam County Superior Court, Grays Harbor and Pacific County—Grays Harbor Court Appointed Special Advocate agency, King County—King County Superior Court, Kitsap County—Kitsap County Superior Court, Pierce County—Multicultural Child and Family Hope Center, Snohomish County—YWCA, Spokane County—Catholic Charities of Eastern Washington, Thurston, Lewis and Mason County—Family Education and Support Services, and Whatcom County—Whatcom County Superior Court.

Child Welfare Housing Pilot Program. In 2019, the Legislature created the Child Welfare Housing Pilot Program (CHWPP) with the goal of shortening the time that children remain in out-of-home care. To meet this goal, the CHWPP provides housing support and services to families with a dependent child whose primary remaining barrier to reunification is the lack of appropriate housing.

Summary of Bill: Family Connections Program. It is the stated intent of the Legislature that the Family Connections Program (FCP) 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. Beginning September 1, 2020, DCYF must contract with an external organization, or organizations, to implement and operate the FCP, the purpose of

which is to facilitate interaction between the parent of a child found to dependent and in out-of-home care, and the individual with whom the child is placed. All services provided by the FCP should supplement the current responsibilities and services provided by DCYF.

Elements of the Family Connections Program. The FCP will operate in one location in eastern Washington and one location in western Washington.

Families can be referred to FCP by a caseworker, an attorney, a guardian ad litem, a parent ally, an office of public defense social worker, or the court.

Upon receiving a referral, the FCP will determine whether an in-person meeting between a parent with a dependent child and the individual the child is placed with is appropriate.

If an in-person meeting is determined to be appropriate, the FCP will determine whether both parties are willing to participate in an in-person meeting and if there are any safety concerns that would prevent an in-person meeting.

If a meeting is determined to be appropriate, the FCP will make a referral to the family connections program team. The team includes a parent ally and an experienced caregiver. The FCP team will ensure the parent ally contacts the parent and the experienced caregiver contacts the caregiver to prepare for an in-person meeting, convene the in-person meeting, and provide ongoing support to the parent and caregiver.

If a meeting is determined to not be appropriate, the FCP team will facilitate the exchange of information between the parent and caregiver in a manner that does not include an in-person meeting, but may include written messages, phone calls, or videoconferencing. The FCP team shall routinely evaluate whether an in-person meeting should occur.

Data and Outcome Measures. By September 1, 2021, DCYF shall submit a report to the appropriate committees of the Legislature and the Governor the the following details:

- data collected for the FCP;
- outcomes for families engaging in the FCP; and
- DCYF's plan on how to expand the FCP statewide.

"Experienced caregiver" means an individual who is or has received a foster-family home license or an individual who cared for a child who was removed from their parents and who has a kin relationship to that child.

The FCP expires on June 30, 2022.

Parents for Parents and Child Welfare Housing Assistance Pilot Programs. The term child welfare parent mentor is replaced with parent ally.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: As we are working on changing the culture of foster care, we need to connect parent allies with those with lived experience. Connecting biological parents and foster families helps reduce trauma for everyone involved, including the child. If the parties can develop a relationship, the relationship may last longer than the dependency. With increased communication between all the parties, there will be better outcomes.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Representative Lisa Callan, Prime Sponsor; Jamie Lucas, citizen; Lisa Shaull, citizen; Jennifer Gears, Kindering.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.