

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5531

As of February 13, 2013

Title: An act relating to measuring performance of the child welfare system.

Brief Description: Measuring performance of the child welfare system.

Sponsors: Senators Darneille, Litzow, Hargrove, Murray, Nelson, Carrell, Pearson, Fain, Mullet, Harper, Tom, Rivers, Hewitt, Hill and Keiser.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Human Services & Corrections: 2/11/13.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES & CORRECTIONS

Staff: Joan Miller (786-7784)

Background: In 1998, a lawsuit was filed against Washington State and the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) on behalf of 13 foster children who had experienced harmful conditions during their time in foster care caused by placements in multiple foster homes and insufficient services. A settlement agreement between the parties resulted in 2004, and within it, DSHS agreed to make reforms in six key areas: placement stability; mental health; foster parent training; unsafe or inappropriate placements; sibling separation; and adolescent services. The settlement also established the Braam Oversight Panel (Panel), consisting of five independent members who were to create an implementation plan to improve outcomes in these areas and to oversee DSHS's progress in making reforms.

The Panel's monitoring report for the first half of 2012 shows that DSHS made significant progress in improving many aspects of the state's foster care system, but there are still benchmarks that have not been met, including the rate of sibling visitation, social worker caseloads, caregiver training, and educational needs of children.

In October 2011, the parties entered into a revised settlement agreement that acknowledged DSHS's progress but also recognized that many key outcomes had not been met. The revised agreement extended the Panel's oversight operations only until December 31, 2012.

Summary of Bill: To understand how the child welfare system is performing at any given time, three key indicators of safety, permanency, and well-being must be used to measure the

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delivery of appropriate services for the children and families served by the child welfare system, and to identify areas for future improvements.

The safety indicators that must be used are the recurrence of safety concerns regarding children in the home and regarding children in out-of-home care. The permanency indicators that must be used are the safe reunification of children placed in out-of-home care, length of time to permanence for children placed in out-of-home care, and placement stability. The well-being indicators that must be used are maintenance of family relationships for children placed in out-of-home care, levels of educational readiness and attainment, behavioral and physical health, and adult functioning of youth who have aged out of the system.

By October 31, 2013, a university-based children research entity, in collaboration with DSHS and stakeholders, must develop measurements for each of these three indicators. Measurements must be calculated from data used in the routine work of the state agencies' data and information technology departments.

Beginning on January 1, 2014, the state agencies must provide the research entity with all measurement data at least quarterly. Beginning on September 1, 2014, the research entity must make the data publicly available and issue public reports at least twice per year. By December 31, 2013, the state agencies must execute agreements with the research entity to enable such sharing of data.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on February 7, 2013.

Committee/Commission/Task Force Created: No.

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

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: Public and private sectors need a consistent way to tell how the child welfare system is actually performing. These indicators will help us measure empirically to improve services and make better budgetary decisions. DSHS supports outcome measurements for child support services, but the agency has two specific issues with the bill as written: we believe it increase liability for the department, and some of the indicators are different from what we currently measure, which is confusing. This bill is an opportunity to provide consistency between administrations in the level of cooperation in the provision of data and to provide empirical, scientifically evidence-based data to the Legislature and DSHS. It is frustrating to continuously have new initiatives being introduced before we have the chance to see how well the last one worked. This bill is also an opportunity for Partners for Our Children to be recognized as a national research entity, something that is sorely needed in this area. Partners for Our Children does not receive state money; we are largely supported by private funds, and we believe that we can use existing funding to support this work. It also should be pointed out that these data that we are talking about are aggregated data. It will not be possible to make any inferences about individuals.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Jennifer Strus, DSHS; Jeanine Livingston, WA Federation of State Employees; Ben de Haan, Partners for Our Children.