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**HOUSE BILL 1970**

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**State of Washington 64th Legislature 2015 Regular Session**

**By** Representatives Senn and Walsh; by request of Department of Social and Health Services

AN ACT Relating to permanency plans of care for dependent children; amending RCW 13.34.136; and reenacting and amending RCW 13.34.145.

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

**Sec.**  RCW 13.34.136 and 2014 c 163 s 2 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) Whenever a child is ordered removed from the home, a permanency plan shall be developed no later than sixty days from the time the supervising agency assumes responsibility for providing services, including placing the child, or at the time of a hearing under RCW 13.34.130, whichever occurs first. The permanency planning process continues until a permanency planning goal is achieved or dependency is dismissed. The planning process shall include reasonable efforts to return the child to the parent's home.

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

The permanency plan shall include:

(a) A permanency plan of care that shall identify one of the following outcomes as a primary goal and may identify additional outcomes as alternative goals: Return of the child to the home of the child's parent, guardian, or legal custodian; adoption, including a tribal customary adoption as defined in RCW 13.38.040; guardianship; permanent legal custody; long-term relative or foster care, ((~~until~~))if the child is between ages sixteen and eighteen, with a written agreement between the parties and the care provider; successful completion of a responsible living skills program; or independent living, if appropriate and if the child is age sixteen or older. The department or supervising agency shall not discharge a child to an independent living situation before the child is eighteen years of age unless the child becomes emancipated pursuant to chapter 13.64 RCW;

(b) Unless the court has ordered, pursuant to RCW 13.34.130(8), that a termination petition be filed, a specific plan as to where the child will be placed, what steps will be taken to return the child home, what steps the supervising agency or the department will take to promote existing appropriate sibling relationships and/or facilitate placement together or contact in accordance with the best interests of each child, and what actions the department or supervising agency will take to maintain parent-child ties. All aspects of the plan shall include the goal of achieving permanence for the child.

(i) The department's or supervising agency's plan shall specify what services the parents will be offered to enable them to resume custody, what requirements the parents must meet to resume custody, and a time limit for each service plan and parental requirement.

(A) If the parent is incarcerated, the plan must address how the parent will participate in the case conference and permanency planning meetings and, where possible, must include treatment that reflects the resources available at the facility where the parent is confined. The plan must provide for visitation opportunities, unless visitation is not in the best interests of the child.

(B) If a parent has a developmental disability according to the definition provided in RCW 71A.10.020, and that individual is eligible for services provided by the developmental disabilities administration, the department shall make reasonable efforts to consult with the developmental disabilities administration to create an appropriate plan for services. For individuals who meet the definition of developmental disability provided in RCW 71A.10.020 and who are eligible for services through the developmental disabilities administration, the plan for services must be tailored to correct the parental deficiency taking into consideration the parent's disability and the department shall also determine an appropriate method to offer those services based on the parent's disability.

(ii)(A) Visitation is the right of the family, including the child and the parent, in cases in which visitation is in the best interest of the child. Early, consistent, and frequent visitation is crucial for maintaining parent-child relationships and making it possible for parents and children to safely reunify. The supervising agency or department shall encourage the maximum parent and child and sibling contact possible, when it is in the best interest of the child, including regular visitation and participation by the parents in the care of the child while the child is in placement.

(B) Visitation shall not be limited as a sanction for a parent's failure to comply with court orders or services where the health, safety, or welfare of the child is not at risk as a result of the visitation.

(C) Visitation may be limited or denied only if the court determines that such limitation or denial is necessary to protect the child's health, safety, or welfare. When a parent or sibling has been identified as a suspect in an active criminal investigation for a violent crime that, if the allegations are true, would impact the safety of the child, the department shall make a concerted effort to consult with the assigned law enforcement officer in the criminal case before recommending any changes in parent/child or child/sibling contact. In the event that the law enforcement officer has information pertaining to the criminal case that may have serious implications for child safety or well-being, the law enforcement officer shall provide this information to the department during the consultation. The department may only use the information provided by law enforcement during the consultation to inform family visitation plans and may not share or otherwise distribute the information to any person or entity. Any information provided to the department by law enforcement during the consultation is considered investigative information and is exempt from public inspection pursuant to RCW 42.56.240. The results of the consultation shall be communicated to the court.

(D) The court and the department or supervising agency should rely upon community resources, relatives, foster parents, and other appropriate persons to provide transportation and supervision for visitation to the extent that such resources are available, and appropriate, and the child's safety would not be compromised.

(iii)(A) The department, court, or caregiver in the out-of-home placement may not limit visitation or contact between a child and sibling as a sanction for a child's behavior or as an incentive to the child to change his or her behavior.

(B) Any exceptions, limitation, or denial of contacts or visitation must be approved by the supervisor of the department caseworker and documented. The child, parent, department, guardian ad litem, or court-appointed special advocate may challenge the denial of visits in court.

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

(v) The plan shall state whether both in-state and, where appropriate, out-of-state placement options have been considered by the department or supervising agency.

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

(vii) The supervising agency or department shall provide all reasonable services that are available within the department or supervising agency, or within the community, or those services which the department has existing contracts to purchase. It shall report to the court if it is unable to provide such services; and

(c) If the court has ordered, pursuant to RCW 13.34.130(8), that a termination petition be filed, a specific plan as to where the child will be placed, what steps will be taken to achieve permanency for the child, services to be offered or provided to the child, and, if visitation would be in the best interests of the child, a recommendation to the court regarding visitation between parent and child pending a fact-finding hearing on the termination petition. The department or supervising agency shall not be required to develop a plan of services for the parents or provide services to the parents if the court orders a termination petition be filed. However, reasonable efforts to ensure visitation and contact between siblings shall be made unless there is reasonable cause to believe the best interests of the child or siblings would be jeopardized.

(3) Permanency planning goals should be achieved at the earliest possible date. If the child has been in out-of-home care for fifteen of the most recent twenty-two months, and the court has not made a good cause exception, the court shall require the department or supervising agency to file a petition seeking termination of parental rights in accordance with RCW 13.34.145(4)(b)(vi). In cases where parental rights have been terminated, the child is legally free for adoption, and adoption has been identified as the primary permanency planning goal, it shall be a goal to complete the adoption within six months following entry of the termination order.

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

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

(6) The court shall consider the child's relationships with the child's siblings in accordance with RCW 13.34.130(6). Whenever the permanency plan for a child is adoption, the court shall encourage the prospective adoptive parents, birth parents, foster parents, kinship caregivers, and the department or other supervising agency to seriously consider the long-term benefits to the child adoptee and his or her siblings of providing for and facilitating continuing postadoption contact between the siblings. To the extent that it is feasible, and when it is in the best interests of the child adoptee and his or her siblings, contact between the siblings should be frequent and of a similar nature as that which existed prior to the adoption. If the child adoptee or his or her siblings are represented by an attorney or guardian ad litem in a proceeding under this chapter or in any other child custody proceeding, the court shall inquire of each attorney and guardian ad litem regarding the potential benefits of continuing contact between the siblings and the potential detriments of severing contact. This section does not require the department of social and health services or other supervising agency to agree to any specific provisions in an open adoption agreement and does not create a new obligation for the department to provide supervision or transportation for visits between siblings separated by adoption from foster care.

(7) For purposes related to permanency planning:

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

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

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

**Sec.**  RCW 13.34.145 and 2013 c 332 s 3, 2013 c 206 s 1, and 2013 c 173 s 3 are each reenacted and amended to read as follows:

(1) The purpose of a permanency planning hearing is to review the permanency plan for the child, inquire into the welfare of the child and progress of the case, and reach decisions regarding the permanent placement of the child.

(a) A permanency planning hearing shall be held in all cases where the child has remained in out-of-home care for at least nine months and an adoption decree, guardianship order, or permanent custody order has not previously been entered. The hearing shall take place no later than twelve months following commencement of the current placement episode.

(b) Whenever a child is removed from the home of a dependency guardian or long-term relative or foster care provider, and the child is not returned to the home of the parent, guardian, or legal custodian but is placed in out-of-home care, a permanency planning hearing shall take place no later than twelve months, as provided in this section, following the date of removal unless, prior to the hearing, the child returns to the home of the dependency guardian or long-term care provider, the child is placed in the home of the parent, guardian, or legal custodian, an adoption decree, guardianship order, or a permanent custody order is entered, or the dependency is dismissed. Every effort shall be made to provide stability in long-term placement, and to avoid disruption of placement, unless the child is being returned home or it is in the best interest of the child.

(c) Permanency planning goals should be achieved at the earliest possible date, preferably before the child has been in out-of-home care for fifteen months. In cases where parental rights have been terminated, the child is legally free for adoption, and adoption has been identified as the primary permanency planning goal, it shall be a goal to complete the adoption within six months following entry of the termination order.

(2) No later than ten working days prior to the permanency planning hearing, the agency having custody of the child shall submit a written permanency plan to the court and shall mail a copy of the plan to all parties and their legal counsel, if any.

(3) When the youth is at least age seventeen years but not older than seventeen years and six months, the department shall provide the youth with written documentation which explains the availability of extended foster care services and detailed instructions regarding how the youth may access such services after he or she reaches age eighteen years.

(4) At the permanency planning hearing, the court shall conduct the following inquiry:

(a) If a goal of long-term foster or relative care has been achieved prior to the permanency planning hearing, the court shall review the child's status to determine whether the placement and the plan for the child's care remain appropriate. The court shall find, as of the date of the hearing, another planned permanent living arrangement is the best permanency plan for the child and provide compelling reasons why it continues to not be in the child's best interest to (i) return home; (ii) be placed for adoption; (iii) be placed with a legal guardian; or (iv) be placed with a fit and willing relative. If the child is present at the hearing, the court should ask the child about his or her desired permanency outcome.

(b) In cases where the primary permanency planning goal has not been achieved, the court shall inquire regarding the reasons why the primary goal has not been achieved and determine what needs to be done to make it possible to achieve the primary goal. The court shall review the permanency plan prepared by the agency and make explicit findings regarding each of the following:

(i) The continuing necessity for, and the safety and appropriateness of, the placement;

(ii) The extent of compliance with the permanency plan by the department or supervising agency and any other service providers, the child's parents, the child, and the child's guardian, if any;

(iii) The extent of any efforts to involve appropriate service providers in addition to department or supervising agency staff in planning to meet the special needs of the child and the child's parents;

(iv) The progress toward eliminating the causes for the child's placement outside of his or her home and toward returning the child safely to his or her home or obtaining a permanent placement for the child;

(v) The date by which it is likely that the child will be returned to his or her home or placed for adoption, with a guardian or in some other alternative permanent placement; and

(vi) If the child has been placed outside of his or her home for fifteen of the most recent twenty-two months, not including any period during which the child was a runaway from the out-of-home placement or the first six months of any period during which the child was returned to his or her home for a trial home visit, the appropriateness of the permanency plan, whether reasonable efforts were made by the department or supervising agency to achieve the goal of the permanency plan, and the circumstances which prevent the child from any of the following:

(A) Being returned safely to his or her home;

(B) Having a petition for the involuntary termination of parental rights filed on behalf of the child;

(C) Being placed for adoption;

(D) Being placed with a guardian;

(E) Being placed in the home of a fit and willing relative of the child; or

(F) Being placed in some other alternative permanent placement, including independent living or long-term foster care.

(5) Following this inquiry, at the permanency planning hearing, the court shall order the department or supervising agency to file a petition seeking termination of parental rights if the child has been in out-of-home care for fifteen of the last twenty-two months since the date the dependency petition was filed unless the court makes a good cause exception as to why the filing of a termination of parental rights petition is not appropriate. Any good cause finding shall be reviewed at all subsequent hearings pertaining to the child.

(a) For purposes of this subsection, "good cause exception" includes but is not limited to the following:

(i) The child is being cared for by a relative;

(ii) The department has not provided to the child's family such services as the court and the department have deemed necessary for the child's safe return home;

(iii) The department has documented in the case plan a compelling reason for determining that filing a petition to terminate parental rights would not be in the child's best interests; ((~~or~~))

(iv) The parent is incarcerated, or the parent's prior incarceration is a significant factor in why the child has been in foster care for fifteen of the last twenty-two months, the parent maintains a meaningful role in the child's life, and the department has not documented another reason why it would be otherwise appropriate to file a petition pursuant to this section;

(v) Until June 30, 2015, where a parent has been accepted into a dependency treatment court program or long-term substance abuse or dual diagnoses treatment program and is demonstrating compliance with treatment goals; or

(vi) Until June 30, 2015, where a parent who has been court ordered to complete services necessary for the child's safe return home files a declaration under penalty of perjury stating the parent's financial inability to pay for the same court-ordered services, and also declares the department was unwilling or unable to pay for the same services necessary for the child's safe return home.

(b) The court's assessment of whether a parent who is incarcerated maintains a meaningful role in the child's life may include consideration of the following:

(i) The parent's expressions or acts of manifesting concern for the child, such as letters, telephone calls, visits, and other forms of communication with the child;

(ii) The parent's efforts to communicate and work with the department or supervising agency or other individuals for the purpose of complying with the service plan and repairing, maintaining, or building the parent‑child relationship;

(iii) A positive response by the parent to the reasonable efforts of the department or the supervising agency;

(iv) Information provided by individuals or agencies in a reasonable position to assist the court in making this assessment, including but not limited to the parent's attorney, correctional and mental health personnel, or other individuals providing services to the parent;

(v) Limitations in the parent's access to family support programs, therapeutic services, and visiting opportunities, restrictions to telephone and mail services, inability to participate in foster care planning meetings, and difficulty accessing lawyers and participating meaningfully in court proceedings; and

(vi) Whether the continued involvement of the parent in the child's life is in the child's best interest.

(c) The constraints of a parent's current or prior incarceration and associated delays or barriers to accessing court‑mandated services may be considered in rebuttal to a claim of aggravated circumstances under RCW 13.34.132(4)((~~(g)~~))(h) for a parent's failure to complete available treatment.

(6)(a) If the permanency plan identifies independent living as a goal, the court at the permanency planning hearing shall make a finding that the provision of services to assist the child in making a transition from foster care to independent living will allow the child to manage his or her financial, personal, social, educational, and nonfinancial affairs prior to approving independent living as a permanency plan of care. The court will inquire whether the child has been provided information about extended foster care services.

(b) The permanency plan shall also specifically identify the services, including extended foster care services, where appropriate, that will be provided to assist the child to make a successful transition from foster care to independent living.

(c) The department or supervising agency shall not discharge a child to an independent living situation before the child is eighteen years of age unless the child becomes emancipated pursuant to chapter 13.64 RCW.

(7) If the child has resided in the home of a foster parent or relative for more than six months prior to the permanency planning hearing, the court shall:

(a) Enter a finding regarding whether the foster parent or relative was informed of the hearing as required in RCW 74.13.280, 13.34.215(6), and 13.34.096; and

(b) If the department or supervising agency is recommending a placement other than the child's current placement with a foster parent, relative, or other suitable person, enter a finding as to the reasons for the recommendation for a change in placement.

(8) In all cases, at the permanency planning hearing, the court shall:

(a)(i) Order the permanency plan prepared by the supervising agency to be implemented; or

(ii) Modify the permanency plan, and order implementation of the modified plan; and

(b)(i) Order the child returned home only if the court finds that a reason for removal as set forth in RCW 13.34.130 no longer exists; or

(ii) Order the child to remain in out-of-home care for a limited specified time period while efforts are made to implement the permanency plan.

(9) Following the first permanency planning hearing, the court shall hold a further permanency planning hearing in accordance with this section at least once every twelve months until a permanency planning goal is achieved or the dependency is dismissed, whichever occurs first.

(10) Prior to the second permanency planning hearing, the agency that has custody of the child shall consider whether to file a petition for termination of parental rights.

(11) If the court orders the child returned home, casework supervision by the department or supervising agency shall continue for at least six months, at which time a review hearing shall be held pursuant to RCW 13.34.138, and the court shall determine the need for continued intervention.

(12) The juvenile court may hear a petition for permanent legal custody when: (a) The court has ordered implementation of a permanency plan that includes permanent legal custody; and (b) the party pursuing the permanent legal custody is the party identified in the permanency plan as the prospective legal custodian. During the pendency of such proceeding, the court shall conduct review hearings and further permanency planning hearings as provided in this chapter. At the conclusion of the legal guardianship or permanent legal custody proceeding, a juvenile court hearing shall be held for the purpose of determining whether dependency should be dismissed. If a guardianship or permanent custody order has been entered, the dependency shall be dismissed.

(13) Continued juvenile court jurisdiction under this chapter shall not be a barrier to the entry of an order establishing a legal guardianship or permanent legal custody when the requirements of subsection (12) of this section are met.

(14) Nothing in this chapter may be construed to limit the ability of the agency that has custody of the child to file a petition for termination of parental rights or a guardianship petition at any time following the establishment of dependency. Upon the filing of such a petition, a fact-finding hearing shall be scheduled and held in accordance with this chapter unless the department or supervising agency requests dismissal of the petition prior to the hearing or unless the parties enter an agreed order terminating parental rights, establishing guardianship, or otherwise resolving the matter.

(15) The approval of a permanency plan that does not contemplate return of the child to the parent does not relieve the supervising agency of its obligation to provide reasonable services, under this chapter, intended to effectuate the return of the child to the parent, including but not limited to, visitation rights. The court shall consider the child's relationships with siblings in accordance with RCW 13.34.130.

(16) Nothing in this chapter may be construed to limit the procedural due process rights of any party in a termination or guardianship proceeding filed under this chapter.

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