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**SENATE BILL 5426**

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**State of Washington 68th Legislature 2023 Regular Session**

**By** Senators Kauffman, C. Wilson, Kuderer, Lovelett, Lovick, Salomon, and Valdez; by request of Department of Children, Youth, and Families

AN ACT Relating to implementing the family connections program; amending RCW 74.13.715; providing an effective date; and declaring an emergency.

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

**Sec.**  RCW 74.13.715 and 2021 c 334 s 990 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) ((~~Beginning September 1, 2020~~)) Within available funding, 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 or more locations west of the crest of the Cascade mountains, and one or more locations east of the crest of the Cascade mountains.

(3) Families may be referred to the family connections program by a department 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, 2023.~~))

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  This act is necessary for the immediate preservation of the public peace, health, or safety, or support of the state government and its existing public institutions, and takes effect June 30, 2023.

**--- END ---**