

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SSB 5811

As Reported by House Committee On:
Children & Family Services

Title: An act relating to the involvement of the birth family in foster care.

Brief Description: Requiring greater opportunities for involvement of birth families in foster care.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Children & Family Services & Corrections (originally sponsored by Senators Hargrove, Stevens and McAuliffe).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Children & Family Services: 3/26/03, 4/2/03 [DPA].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill
(As Amended by House Committee)

- Encourages foster parents to facilitate greater involvement of birth parents with their children in foster care.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES

Majority Report: Do pass as amended. Signed by 8 members: Representatives Kagi, Chair; Darneille, Vice Chair; Boldt, Ranking Minority Member; Bailey, Dickerson, Miloscia, Pettigrew and Shabro.

Staff: Cynthia Forland (786-7152).

Background:

The Children's Administration (CA) in the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) provides a wide range of services to protect children from abuse and neglect and support families. The CA oversees out-of-home care for children who need short-term or temporary protection from abuse, neglect, or family conflict. The goal of out-of-home care is to return children to their homes or to care for them while more permanent homes are found. Foster homes are the most common kind of out-of-home placement. Each month about 10,000 children in the state are living in foster homes. The median length

of stay in foster care is 60 days. In fiscal year 2001, a total of 15,853 children were cared for in out-of-home placement; of those, 5,636 were reunified with their parents in that year.

The DSHS is required, absent good cause, to follow the wishes of the natural parent regarding the placement of a child in foster care. Preferences such as family constellation, sibling relationships, ethnicity, and religion must be considered when matching children to foster homes. Parental authority is determined to be appropriate in areas that are not connected with the abuse or neglect that resulted in the dependency and must be integrated through the foster care team, which consists of a child's parents, foster parents, and social worker.

Summary of Amended Bill:

When a child is placed in out-of-home care, the child's foster parents are encouraged to:

- Provide consultation to the foster care team based upon their experience with the child placed in their care;
- Mentor the child's birth parents by helping them understand the child's needs and correlating appropriate parenting responses;
- Participate in educational activities, and enter into community-building activities with birth families and other foster families; and
- Transport the child to family time visits with his or her birth family and assist the child and his or her family in maximizing the purposefulness of family time.

"Birth family" means: any blood relative, including those of half-blood and first cousins, nephews or nieces, and persons of preceding generations as denoted by prefixes of grand, great, or great-great; a stepfather, stepmother, stepbrother, and stepsister; a person who legally adopts a child or the child's parent, as well as the natural and other legally adopted children of such persons, and other relatives of the adoptive parents in accordance with state law; spouses of any of the above-specified individuals, even after the marriage is terminated; or extended family members, as defined by the law or custom of an Indian child's tribe or, in the absence of such law or custom, a person who has reached the age of 18 and who is the Indian child's grandparent, aunt or uncle, brother or sister, brother-in-law or sister-in-law, niece or nephew, first or second cousin, or stepparent who provides care in the family abode on a 24-hour basis to an Indian child as defined in the federal Indian Child Welfare Act.

Amended Bill Compared to Substitute Bill:

The intent section of the bill is shortened and revised.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not Requested.

Effective Date of Amended Bill: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: (In support) This bill completes enactment of the recommendations of a 1989 foster care task force. The goal of this bill is to increase the likelihood and possibility of reunification. The resolution of difficulties resulting from a child's separation from his or her birth family is important whether or not reunification is an option. This bill encourages activities similar to those realized in the Connections Project, operated by Catholic Community Services, which has proved successful. The bill speaks to a cultural shift in relation to foster care, which would decrease the number of placement disruptions, decrease the number of complaints to Child Protective Services by birth parents, increase the safety of reunifications, increase voluntary relinquishments, and prevent a child's return to foster care following reunification.

(With concerns) The bill does not provide guidance in how this new approach should be implemented.

Testimony Against: None.

Testified: (In support) Senator Hargrove, prime sponsor; Julie Fisher, Catholic Community Services; Ricardo Martinez and Jeanne Bertalan, foster parents; and Laurie Lippold, Children's Home Society.

(With concerns) Charyl Gerring, Catholic Community Services.