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**HOUSE BILL 1873**

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**State of Washington 68th Legislature 2024 Regular Session**

**By** Representatives Ortiz-Self, Couture, Taylor, Reed, Simmons, Doglio, Orwall, Wylie, Reeves, and Pollet

AN ACT Relating to office of public defense social service workers for parents in child welfare cases; adding a new section to chapter 2.70 RCW; creating a new section; and providing an expiration date.

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

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  (1) The legislature finds that research demonstrates that providing multidisciplinary representation to parents with a dependency case, meaning support from both an attorney and a social service worker working with the parent's attorney, does the following:

(a) Shortens the length of out-of-home placement;

(b) Reduces the impacts of trauma to children and families related to child welfare interventions; and

(c) Supports the overall well-being of children and families without jeopardizing child safety.

(2) The legislature further finds that one critical moment in a dependency case is the first court hearing, called the shelter care hearing, when a parent has their first opportunity to appear before a judge and argue against family separation. This hearing occurs within 72 hours of the dependency petition filed by the department of children, youth, and families, excluding weekends and holidays. The shelter care early engagement project, also known as "SCEEP," would provide multidisciplinary representation at the first and subsequent shelter care hearings, which may range from 72 hours to the dependency fact finding.

(3) The legislature further finds that SCEEP offers the support of a social service worker at this crucial time. Early engagement can make the difference between children remaining in their home communities or being placed with relatives as parents address parental deficiencies. Before the shelter care hearing, an office of public defense shelter care early engagement project social service worker can build rapport and identify a parent's strengths, concerns, and needs. That worker can identify and locate resources and reduce barriers to service engagement.

(4) The legislature further finds that the goal of the pilot program established in this act is to study whether providing this time-limited social service worker support results in the court considering more in-home dependencies when appropriate and fewer or shorter out-of-home placements while also ensuring child safety.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 2.70 RCW to read as follows:

(1) The office of public defense shall establish and administer a pilot program that provides indigent parents in dependency and termination cases with voluntary access to a social service worker contracted by the office of public defense beginning at a shelter care hearing as described in chapter 13.34 RCW. The social service worker required under this section should: (a) Provide parent support; (b) advocate for the parent; and (c) participate in community child welfare improvement and court improvement meetings.

(2) The pilot program described in this section must be provided in at least five counties.

(3) The pilot program described in this section must be implemented by January 1, 2025.

(4) By November 1, 2025, and in compliance with RCW 43.01.036, the office of public defense shall submit a report to the legislature and the governor that describes the pilot program required under this section including:

(a) The number of families served by the program;

(b) Outcome information for the families served by the program; and

(c) Recommendations regarding maintaining or expanding the program.

(5) This section expires July 1, 2026.

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