

HOUSE BILL REPORT

2SHB 1204

As Passed Legislature

Title: An act relating to implementing the family connections program.

Brief Description: Implementing the family connections program.

Sponsors: House Committee on Appropriations (originally sponsored by Representatives Callan, Eslick, Leavitt, Bateman, Kloba, Reed, Simmons, Doglio, Goodman, Ortiz-Self, McEntire, Davis and Pollet; by request of Department of Children, Youth, and Families).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Human Services, Youth, & Early Learning: 1/17/23, 1/27/23 [DPS];

Appropriations: 2/8/23, 2/13/23 [DP2S(w/o sub HSEL)].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 2/27/23, 95-0.

Passed Senate: 4/10/23, 49-0.

Passed Legislature.

Brief Summary of Second Substitute Bill

- Establishes the Family Connections Program as a permanent program, instead of one that expires on June 30, 2023.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES, YOUTH, & EARLY LEARNING

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 11 members: Representatives Senn, Chair; Cortes, Vice Chair; Taylor, Vice Chair; Eslick, Ranking Minority Member; Couture, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Callan, Dent, Goodman, Ortiz-Self, Rule and Walsh.

Staff: Luke Wickham (786-7146).

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Majority Report: The second substitute bill be substituted therefor and the second substitute bill do pass and do not pass the substitute bill by Committee on Human Services, Youth, & Early Learning. Signed by 29 members: Representatives Ormsby, Chair; Bergquist, Vice Chair; Gregerson, Vice Chair; Macri, Vice Chair; Stokesbary, Ranking Minority Member; Chambers, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Corry, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Berg, Chopp, Connors, Couture, Davis, Dye, Fitzgibbon, Hansen, Harris, Lekanoff, Pollet, Rude, Ryu, Sandlin, Schmick, Senn, Simmons, Slatter, Springer, Steele, Stonier and Tharinger.

Staff: Jackie Wheeler (786-7125).

Background:

The Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) contracts with Amara to operate the Family Connections Program (Program), which currently operates in King, Pierce, Mason, Clark, Grays Harbor, Pacific, Kitsap, and Skamania counties. The Program facilitates interaction between a parent of a child who is dependent and in out-of-home care and the person with whom the child is placed.

Families may be referred to the Program by:

- a DCYF caseworker;
- an attorney;
- a guardian ad litem;
- a parent ally;
- an Office of Public Defense social worker; or
- the court.

After receiving a referral, the Program must determine whether an in-person meeting between the parent and the individual with whom the child is placed is appropriate. If the Program determines that this meeting is appropriate, the Program then determines whether:

- the parent and the individual with whom the child is placed are willing to participate in an in-person meeting; and
- safety concerns exist such that an in-person meeting should not occur.

If the Program determines that an in-person meeting should occur, the Program provides a referral to the program team. The program team includes a parent ally and an experienced caregiver.

Once the program team receives a referral, the program team must:

- ensure that the parent ally contact the parent to prepare for a meeting with the caregiver;
- ensure that the experienced caregiver contact the caregiver to prepare for a meeting

- with the parent;
- convene a meeting between the parent and the caregiver; and
- provide ongoing support to the parent and caregiver.

If the Program determines that an in-person meeting should not occur, the program team must facilitate the exchange of information between the parent and the caregiver in a manner that does not include an in-person meeting.

Summary of Second Substitute Bill:

The requirement that the Department of Children, Youth, and Families contract with an external organization or organizations to implement and operate the Family Connections Program (Program) is made a permanent requirement instead of one that ends June 30, 2023. The bill will allow the Program to operate in one or more locations on either side of the Cascade mountain range.

The process by which families may be referred to the Program is expanded to allow referral in any manner determined to be appropriate by the Program and specifically including referral by the parent or caregiver.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill contains an emergency clause and takes effect on June 30, 2023. However, the bill is null and void unless funded in the budget.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Human Services, Youth, & Early Learning):

(In support) The Family Connections Program (Program) has been built out, and this should be established as a permanent program. The goal of this program is to help the adults exchange information that would be helpful to caring for the child.

This program is focused on building relationships between adults caring for a child in out-of-home care and a parent. Caregivers often give support to parents during placement transitions for a child. These relationships help shift what may begin as an adversarial relationship to a supportive relationship.

This program includes providing mentoring, counseling, and other support services. This program works to reduce the trauma experienced by youth by helping build relationships between the adults involved in a child's life.

Foster parents often want to build relationships with birth parents but do not have the support and tools to do so.

If foster parents had more conversations with the other adults in a child's life, children would learn more about their family history.

(Opposed) None.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Appropriations):

(In support) This bill will make the Family Connections Program a permanent program. The program focuses on supporting parents and caregivers in building positive and collaborative relationships while in the state child welfare system. There are parents impacted by the Family Connections Program who were reunified with their children and have become certified mentors in the program and see the impact in other families. Because of this program, one father was able to reunify despite his work changing his hours right before reunification was planned because his child's former caregivers were able to be a childcare resource. With their help, this father was able to keep his job and reunify as planned, and the former caregivers decided to continue to be foster caregivers when they had previously been uncertain.

The program currently works with families on both sides of the Cascades, supporting parents and caregivers in lessening the impacts of trauma experienced in the child welfare system while reducing time and costs associated with a frequently adversarial relationship in the system. The program can reduce court costs by getting parties to resolve issues outside of the court system and reduce costs for recruitment and retention of caregivers. It can also lessen the stress of the caseworkers with the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) by encouraging positive relationships which help with staff retention. The program can also reduce stress for families by expanding their communities of support and building relationships that will last well beyond DCYF involvement.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying (Human Services, Youth, & Early Learning): Representative Lisa Callan, prime sponsor; Katie Biron and Nicole Mazon, Amara; and Amy Jacobsen.

Persons Testifying (Appropriations): Katie Biron and Leroy Pascubillo, Amara.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Human Services, Youth, & Early Learning): Allison Krutsinger, Department of Children, Youth, and Families.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Appropriations): None.