

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SSB 5256

As Passed House - Amended:

April 11, 2023

Title: An act relating to making permanent and expanding the child welfare housing assistance program.

Brief Description: Making permanent and expanding the child welfare housing assistance program.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Human Services (originally sponsored by Senators Saldaña, Wilson, C., Frame, Hasegawa, Hunt, Kuderer, Lovelett, Lovick, Nguyen, Nobles, Robinson, Valdez and Wellman; by request of Department of Children, Youth, and Families).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Human Services, Youth, & Early Learning: 3/14/23, 3/17/23 [DP];

Appropriations: 3/31/23, 4/3/23 [DP].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 4/11/23, 94-3.

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill (As Amended by House)

- Establishes the Child Welfare Housing Assistance Program (Program) as a permanent program instead of a pilot expiring on June 30, 2023.
- Expands eligibility for the Program.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES, YOUTH, & EARLY LEARNING

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 10 members: Representatives Senn, Chair; Cortes, Vice Chair; Taylor, Vice Chair; Eslick, Ranking Minority Member; Couture, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Callan, Dent, Goodman, Ortiz-Self and Rule.

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.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 1 member: Representative Walsh.

Staff: Luke Wickham (786-7146).

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Majority Report: Do pass. 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, Davis, Dye, Fitzgibbon, Hansen, Harris, Lekanoff, Pollet, Riccelli, Rude, Ryu, Sandlin, Schmick, Senn, Simmons, Slatter, Springer, Steele, Stonier and Tharinger.

Staff: Jackie Wheeler (786-7125).

Background:

Child Welfare Housing Assistance Pilot Program.

The Child Welfare Housing Assistance Pilot Program (Program) was authorized to begin July 1, 2020, and provides housing vouchers, rental assistance, navigation, and other support services to eligible families.

The Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) is required to operate or contract for the operation of the Program, and contracted with Reliable Enterprise located in Lewis County to operate the Program.

A parent with a child who is dependent and whose primary remaining barrier to reunification is the lack of appropriate housing is eligible for the Program. A total of 123 families have received housing vouchers or other assistance through the Program. Currently, there is a waitlist of 40 families interested in receiving assistance through the Program.

The Program is scheduled to expire June 30, 2023.

Candidate for Foster Care.

A child who is a candidate for foster care is a child who the DCYF identifies as being at imminent risk of entering foster care, but who can remain safely in the child's home or in a kinship placement as long as services or programs that are necessary to prevent entry of the child into foster care are provided. This includes a child whose adoption or guardianship arrangement is at risk of a disruption or dissolution that would result in a foster care placement.

A child is a candidate for foster care when:

- the child has been abandoned by the parent and the child's health, safety, and welfare

- is seriously endangered as a result;
- the child has been abused or neglected and the child's health, safety, and welfare is seriously endangered as a result;
- there is no parent capable of meeting the child's needs such that the child is in circumstances that constitute a serious danger to the child's development; or
- the child is otherwise at imminent risk of harm.

Summary of Amended Bill:

The Child Welfare Housing Assistance Program (Program) is established as a permanent program instead of a pilot program. The Program is expanded to serve one or more counties on the east and west sides of the Cascade Mountains.

The eligibility for the Program is expanded to include:

- a parent with a child who is dependent and a lack of appropriate housing is a remaining barrier to reunification; and
- a parent of a child who is a candidate for foster care and whose housing instability is a barrier to the child remaining in the home.

The Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) must contract with an outside entity or entities who have a demonstrated understanding of the importance of stable housing for children and families involved or at risk of being involved with the child welfare system to operate the Program.

The Child Welfare Housing Assistance Program is subject to the availability of funds appropriated for that purpose.

The reporting requirement for the DCYF is modified to require the report on the Program to:

- occur annually, instead of biennially, beginning November 1, 2024, and include data not just outcomes;
- be provided to the Legislature;
- include information, when available, regarding distribution of the Program by race, geography, ethnicity, and gender, including a discussion of whether this distribution was equitable; and
- include any recommendations for legislative changes to the Program.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill contains an emergency clause and takes effect on June 30, 2023.

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

(In support) This bill makes the Child Welfare Housing Assistance Program permanent. This bill makes sure that housing assistance is available to limit or prevent the separation between parents and their children. This will help serve families and also save the state money by helping secure matching federal housing grants.

Parents with child welfare involvement are struggling with housing which separates families longer than necessary. Stability starts and ends with housing.

Sometimes opportunities to avoid foster care are overlooked. Damage and trauma can be mitigated by providing housing assistance that may prevent the need for children to enter foster care.

(Opposed) None.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Appropriations):

(In support) This bill would allow a pilot program that the Legislature established in 2019 to become permanent. The program focuses on families where housing issues are a barrier to reunification or are a key factor in terms of removing a child from a family. Many attorneys have reported that housing was a factor in most of their cases and national studies have shown that 30 percent of children in foster care could be reunited with their parent if they were to receive supportive housing services. If fully funded, the bill would allow for an innovative partnership between housing authorities, nonprofit service providers, and the Department of Children, Youth, and Families by connecting federal funding rental vouchers with state-funded support services. Housing authorities across the state have committed vouchers to this effort that will leverage more than \$30 million per year in federal rental subsidies. This program can safely prevent removals and increase reunification. This is better for children and families, and more cost effective for the state.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying (Human Services, Youth, & Early Learning): Lowel Krueger, Yakima Housing Authority; Sharonda Amamilo, Thurston County Superior Court; and Terreca DeFehr, Parents for Parents.

Persons Testifying (Appropriations): Andrew Calkins, Association of Washington Housing Authorities; and Laurie Lippold, Partners for Our Children.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Human Services, Youth, & Early Learning): None.

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