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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

Prefiled 12/05/23. Read first time 01/08/24. Referred to Committee on Human Services, Youth, & Early Learning.

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

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

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

- 11 (a) Shortens the length of out-of-home placement;  
12 (b) Reduces the impacts of trauma to children and families  
13 related to child welfare interventions; and  
14 (c) Supports the overall well-being of children and families  
15 without jeopardizing child safety.

16 (2) The legislature further finds that one critical moment in a  
17 dependency case is the first court hearing, called the shelter care  
18 hearing, when a parent has their first opportunity to appear before a  
19 judge and argue against family separation. This hearing occurs within  
20 72 hours of the dependency petition filed by the department of  
21 children, youth, and families, excluding weekends and holidays. The

1 shelter care early engagement project, also known as "SCEEP," would  
2 provide multidisciplinary representation at the first and subsequent  
3 shelter care hearings, which may range from 72 hours to the  
4 dependency fact finding.

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

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

19 NEW SECTION. **Sec. 2.** A new section is added to chapter 2.70 RCW  
20 to read as follows:

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

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

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

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

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

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

39 and

1           (c) Recommendations regarding maintaining or expanding the  
2 program.

3           (5) This section expires July 1, 2026.

--- **END** ---