
Early Learning & Human Services Committee

SSB 5149

Brief Description: Expanding the early childhood court program.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Human Services (originally sponsored by Senators Cortes, Hasegawa, Krishnadasan, Lias, Nobles, Saldaña, Salomon, Shewmake and Wilson, C.).

<p>Brief Summary of Substitute Bill</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expands the eligibility for Early Childhood Court to include families with children under age 6 instead families of children under age 3.
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Hearing Date: 3/26/25

Staff: Luke Wickham (786-7146).

Background:

Therapeutic Courts.

Therapeutic courts incorporate treatment services and judicial services instead of traditional court practices. These therapeutic courts focus on an individual's needs, providing treatment for the issues presented, and ensuring rapid and appropriate accountability for program violations.

Therapeutic courts incorporate interdisciplinary teams led by a judge who works collaboratively to support and provide supervision to participants. There are various types of therapeutic courts including drug courts, mental health, courts, and Driving Under the Influence courts, veterans therapeutic courts, community courts, tribal healing to wellness courts, juvenile therapeutic courts, family therapeutic courts, early childhood courts, and human trafficking courts.

The judicial branch of government has inherent constitutional authority to establish therapeutic

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courts and state law encourages the use of therapeutic court programs in certain areas.

Early Childhood Court.

A superior court may establish an Early Childhood Court (ECC) to serve the needs of children under the age of three who are the subject of a child welfare (dependency) case. Courts that create an ECC must incorporate the following core components into their program:

- obtaining a memorandum of understanding with the Department of Children, Youth, and Families, developed in collaboration with counsel for parents and children, that outlines how the two entities will coordinate and collaborate;
- a community coordinator that serves as a liaison between the court and community-based resources;
- a community team consisting of stakeholders that serve as an advisory body to the court and implement the program;
- more frequent status hearings than the review hearings required by law;
- family team meetings facilitated by the community coordinator;
- ensuring that families receive early, consistent, and frequent visitation that is developmentally appropriate;
- an individualized case plan for parents that addresses protective factors that mitigate or eliminate safety risks to the child;
- encouraging a respectful, strength-based, compassionate approach to working with parents;
- the development of agreements that encourage stakeholder participation, review of program data, and utilization of technical assistance, training, and evaluation;
- collection and review of data;
- a caseworker with training related to cultural antibias and antiracism;
- responsiveness to community needs and adoption of best practices;
- an attorney for the parent who is present during every meeting of the program; and
- ensuring that parents participating in the program receive all available and appropriate services.

Judicial officers who preside over an ECC must participate in certain trainings related to children in child welfare cases. These trainings include an initial eight-hour training program that can include certain topics and an additional eight hours of continuing education annually thereafter in areas relevant to the ECC.

There are ECCs in five counties in Washington including Clark, Kitsap, Pierce, Thurston, and Spokane counties.

Summary of Bill:

The Early Childhood Court eligibility is expanded to include families with children under age 6 instead families of children under age 3.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Preliminary fiscal note available.

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