

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5149

As of January 22, 2025

Title: An act relating to expanding the early childhood court program.

Brief Description: Expanding the early childhood court program.

Sponsors: Senators Cortes, Hasegawa, Krishnadasan, Lias, Nobles, Saldaña, Salomon, Shewmake and Wilson, C..

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Human Services: 1/22/25.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Provides that an Early Childhood Court (ECC) may serve families with children who are under the age of six at the time the case enters the program.
- Provides that a superior court may provide coordination, resources, and services through its ECC or through the community coordinator to families with a child or children under the age of six who are risk of becoming the subject to a dependency under state law.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Staff: Alison Mendiola (786-7488)

Background: In 2021, the Legislature created the Early Childhood Courts (ECCs) which is a voluntary therapeutic court program to serve families with children under the age of three who are involved in a dependency pursuant to state law. There are five ECCs located in Clark, Kitsap, Pierce, Spokane, and Thurston counties. A case may remain in the ECC after the child is age three or older if the child is still dependent.

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.

Early Childhood Court Program. A superior court may establish an ECC program to serve the needs of families with infants and toddlers under the age of three, who are dependents. If a child turns three while in the program, the child and their family continue to participate in the program. If a superior court creates an ECC program, it is to incorporate the following core components into the program:

- local community coordinators;
- community teams, which are stakeholders to the ECCs that serve as an advisory body to the Court ECCs and implement the ECC program;
- more frequent review hearings;
- family teams which may include all parties to the case and other people or other service providers identified by the parent to be part of the support system for the parent involved;
- fostering an environment where all professionals involved in the ECC program increase their awareness of different forms of bias, trauma, and adversity that often accompanies poverty, mental health, and substance abuse;
- striving to ensure that families receive early, consistent, and frequent visitation that is developmentally appropriate for infants and toddlers; and
- individualized case plans for parents should address protective factors that mitigate or eliminate safety risks to the child.

Each ECC program must review its data to assess its effectiveness and participate in a statewide group of ECCs. The statewide group is to share its data findings and hold statewide meetings to support alignment to the core components and statewide consistency. Judicial officers who preside over ECC hearings are to participate in required trainings.

The Administrative Office of the Courts. The Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) is to administer the certification of training requirements and evaluate the ECCs to ensure the quality, accountability, and fidelity of the programs' evidence-based treatment. Evaluations are to be posted on AOC's website. AOC may provide, or contract for the provision of, training and technical assistance related to program services, consultation and guidance for difficult cases, and ongoing training for court teams.

Summary of Bill: An ECC program may serve families with children who are under the age of six at the time the case enters the program.

A court may provide coordination, resources, and services through its ECC program or through the community coordinator to families with a child or children under the age of six who are risk of becoming the subject to a dependency under state law.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: We need to expand support and services to families with older children up to age six. The program has proved to be very successful helping families reunify. This bill allows an ECC program to serve older children and work with a family earlier in the process. Expanding the age limit would allow ECCs to reach a greater number of families and increase better outcomes for such families at no added cost. Other states have expanded the age of children they serve. Currently, ECCs are not operating at capacity. Reunification rates are higher and adoption rates are lower. This is also consistent for families of color for which there is typically a greater disparity in outcomes. The goal is to serve 20 families per ECC court. Without therapeutic courts, it's much harder for families to go through the dependency process. The ECC addresses the social and emotional needs of the family in a holistic manner. Therapeutic courts allow parents to stabilize their lives, stay connected with their children, and offer unique services not otherwise available through the traditional process.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Adrian Cortes, Prime Sponsor; Morgan Silverman, Center for Children & Youth Justice; Terreca Defehr; Elizabeth Ballou.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.