
**Children & Family Services
Committee**

HB 3085

Brief Description: Encouraging the use of family decision meetings regarding children in the child welfare system.

Sponsors: Representatives Kagi, Boldt, Dickerson, Orcutt, Shabro, Pettigrew, Darneille and Morrell.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Requires the Department of Social and Health Services to establish as a goal the use of family decision meetings for children involved in the child welfare system.

Hearing Date: 2/2/04

Staff: Cynthia Forland (786-7152).

Background:

The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) is required to provide child welfare services throughout the state. Child welfare services are defined by state law as public social services, which strengthen, supplement, or substitute for parental care and supervision for the purpose of:

- preventing or remedying, or assisting in the solution of, problems that may result in families in conflict, or the neglect, abuse, exploitation, or criminal behavior of children;
- protecting and caring for dependent or neglected children;
- assisting children who are in conflict with their parents, and assisting parents who are in conflict with their children with services designed to resolve those conflicts;
- protecting and promoting the welfare of children, including the strengthening of their own homes where possible or where needed; and
- providing adequate care of children away from their homes in foster family homes or day care or other child care agencies or facilities.

The DSHS is also specifically required to perform the following:

- develop, administer, supervise, and monitor a coordinated and comprehensive plan that establishes, aids, and strengthens services for the protection and care of runaway, dependent, or neglected children;
- within available resources, recruit an adequate number of prospective adoptive and foster homes, both regular and specialized, that is, homes for children of ethnic minority,

including Indian homes for Indian children, sibling groups, handicapped and emotionally disturbed, teens, and pregnant and parenting teens;

- investigate complaints of any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker that results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, or sexual abuse or exploitation, or that presents an imminent risk of serious harm, and, on the basis of the findings of such investigation, offer child welfare services in relation to the problem to such parents, legal custodians, or persons serving in loco parentis, and/or bring the situation to the attention of an appropriate court or another community agency;
- offer, on a voluntary basis, family reconciliation services to families who are in conflict;
- monitor out-of-home placements, on a timely and routine basis, to assure the safety, well-being, and quality of care being provided; and
- provide preventive services to families with children that prevent or shorten the duration of an out-of-home placement, within amounts appropriated for that specific purpose.

Summary of Bill:

It is established as the policy of the state to encourage and support meaningful family involvement in the decision making related to planning for children involved in the child welfare system.

The DSHS is required to establish as a goal the use of family decision meetings in each case in which a child is involved in the child welfare system throughout the state by January 1, 2005. It is provided that a family decision meeting is a family-focused intervention facilitated by dedicated professional staff that is designed to build and strengthen the natural caregiving system for the child. The purpose of the family decision meeting is to establish a plan that provides for the safety, attachment, and permanency needs of the child. Family decision meetings may include family group conferences, family unity meetings, family mediation, child and family wrap-around meetings, or other professionally recognized interventions that include extended family and rely upon the family to make decisions about planning for its children.

When the DSHS determines that the use of a family decision meeting is appropriate, an initial meeting must be held as soon as possible following a child's involvement in the child welfare system. If the DSHS elects not to conduct a family decision meeting, the reasons for that decision must be clearly documented in the written service plan of the child developed by the DSHS.

The DSHS is required to develop policies and protocols identifying key decision points at which subsequent family decision meetings must be held, such as prior to changes in a child's placement.

If the DSHS conducts a family decision meeting, the meeting must result in the development of a written family plan that may include service recommendations, placement recommendations, and a permanency plan. The DSHS is required to incorporate the family plan developed at the family decision meeting into the service plan for the child to the extent that the family plan protects the child, builds on family strengths, and is focused on achieving permanency for the child within a reasonable time. If the family plan is not incorporated into the service plan for the child, the DSHS is required to document the reasons in the service plan.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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