

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1769

As Reported by House Committee On:
Early Learning & Children's Services

Title: An act relating to orders for housing assistance in dependency matters.

Brief Description: Concerning housing assistance in dependency matters.

Sponsors: Representatives Orwall, White, Dammeier, Clibborn, Nelson, Liias, Carlyle, Eddy, Uptegrove, Green, Chase, Seaquist, Miloscia, Kagi, Roberts, Kenney and Morrell.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Early Learning & Children's Services: 2/6/09, 2/19/09 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Clarifies the court's authority to order housing services or assistance in children's dependency cases.
- Creates a definition for *housing services or assistance* and incorporates the definition into the list of preventive services in the child dependency chapter.
- Adds references to *housing services or assistance* to the child dependency court processes.
- Specifies there is no entitlement to housing services or assistance under the dependency chapter.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EARLY LEARNING & CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 7 members: Representatives Kagi, Chair; Roberts, Vice Chair; Haler, Ranking Minority Member; Walsh, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Angel, Goodman and Seaquist.

Staff: Sydney Forrester (786-7120)

Background:

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

In children's dependency cases, the court has authority to order various treatment and services be provided to parents and children to facilitate reunification. The court, in conducting dependency review hearings, has explicit authority to order housing assistance when: (1) homelessness or the lack of adequate and safe housing is the primary reason for the child's out-of-home placement; and (2) funding appropriated specifically for housing assistance is available.

In 1997 the Washington State Supreme Court, in *Washington State Coalition for the Homeless v. DSHS*, 133 Wn.2d 894 (1997), ruled that the juvenile dependency court "has authority to order the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) to provide the family with some form of assistance in securing adequate housing in those cases where homelessness or lack of safe and adequate housing is the primary reason for the foster placement or the primary reason for" continuing the child's placement out of the home. The court also held that the nature of housing assistance services provided to families was within the discretion of the DSHS, but the court would determine the adequacy of the services and the reasonableness of the agency's effort. Following this ruling, the Legislature amended the dependency statute in a number of areas to include "housing assistance" and "housing services."

The term "housing services" is one of the "preventive services" defined as "services capable of preventing the need for an out-of-home placement while protecting the child." "Housing services" are described as referrals to federal, state, local, or private agencies that assist people in need with completing forms and applications, or that provide financial subsidies for housing. The term "housing assistance" is not defined.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

A definition is created for *housing service or assistance* and the term includes:

- effective referrals to appropriate agencies or organizations;
- assistance with forms; or
- financial assistance for housing.

The court is authorized to order *housing services or assistance* when: (1) such assistance would likely work to either prevent, or shorten the duration of, the child's out-of-home placement; and (2) funding appropriated for this specific purpose is available. *Housing services or assistance* is declared to not be an entitlement under the child dependency chapter.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute bill makes the following changes to the original bill:

- creates a definition for *housing services or assistance*;
- incorporates *housing services or assistance* into the definition of *preventive services*;
- adds references to *housing services or assistance* to the various court hearings throughout the child dependency process; and

- specifies there is no entitlement to housing services or assistance under the dependency chapter.
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Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available. New fiscal note requested on February 20, 2009.

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

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) When families are struggling, one of the most important things we can do is provide adequate safe housing. The current authority of the court to order housing assistance is limited to when housing is the primary reason for the out-of-home placement. Housing assistance could prevent placement in about 10 - 15 percent of cases and could allow for reunification in other cases. The DSHS is concerned the court can order them to do something they don't have funding to accomplish. This bill is appropriately narrow in its focus and is about families who, but for adequate safe housing, could remain safely together with their children in the home.

Foster care is the world's most expensive form of housing assistance. The DSHS records show that 135 families in Pierce County have children in out-of-home care due to the lack of housing. The State Coalition for the Homeless has been concerned about this issue for many years. The best approach would be to equip social workers with the resources needed to avoid children having to come into the court system at all. This would save on court costs as well as foster care costs.

Getting into clean and sober housing can make all the difference in successfully reunifying families. The court should periodically be asking whether the family can benefit from housing assistance. Parents may be angry at first and say they don't need housing, but down the road after they have made progress in treatment, housing may be the biggest barrier to reunification.

Lack of funding for parents to have safe and sober housing may leave children in foster care much longer than is needed. Often, housing is the last thing on the list and the hardest to arrange.

(With concerns) A standard requirement imposed by the courts for returning children home from foster care is that the parent has safe and stable housing. The system should be focusing on housing assistance at the front-end and to be more creative about working with connecting families to housing resources, especially in rural areas where housing resources may be scarce. The DSHS has not been appropriated money to provide housing for dependency cases.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Orwall, prime sponsor; Michael Mirra, Tacoma Housing Authority; Seth Dawson, Washington State Coalition for the Homeless and Washington State Coalition for Children in Care; Brenda Lopez; Amy Murray; Laurie Lippold, Children's Home Society; and Sharonda Amamilo.

(With concerns) Ken Nichols, Department of Social and Health Services, Children's Administration.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.