

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5486

As of February 4, 2015

Title: An act relating to creating the parents for parents program.

Brief Description: Creating the parents for parents program.

Sponsors: Senators Frockt, O'Ban, Darneille, Fraser, Miloscia, Rolfes, Hargrove, Billig, Ranker, Hewitt, Kohl-Welles and McAuliffe.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Human Services, Mental Health & Housing: 1/29/15.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES, MENTAL HEALTH & HOUSING

Staff: Lindsay Erickson (786-7465)

Background: The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) or any person may file a petition in court to determine if a child should be a dependent of the state due to abuse, neglect, abandonment, or because there is no parent or custodian capable of caring for the child. If the court determines that the child is dependent, then the court will conduct periodic reviews and make determinations about the child's placement and the parents' progress in correcting parental deficiencies. Under certain circumstances, the court may order the filing of a petition for the termination of parental rights.

The Parents for Parents Program was created to increase the number of family reunifications, where appropriate, while decreasing the length of time needed to establish permanence. The program currently operates under DSHS and exists in seven counties: Grays Harbor/Pacific, King, Kitsap, Pierce, Snohomish, Spokane, and Thurston/Mason.

Summary of Bill: The Parents for Parents Program provides peer mentoring for families in the dependency court system increasing parental engagement, and contributes to family reunification. The program is funded through the Office of Public Defense and is centrally administered through a pass-through to a Washington State nonprofit lead organization that has extensive experience supporting veteran parents.

The program's outreach and support to parents begins at the Shelter Care Hearing and is provided by a veteran parent who has successfully navigated the juvenile dependency court

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system. Components of the Parents for Parents Program, provided by veteran parents, must include the following:

- outreach and support to parents at dependency-related hearings, beginning with the shelter care hearing;
- a class that educates parents about the dependency system they must navigate in order to have their children returned, empowers them with tools and resources they need to be successful with their case plan, and provides information that helps them understand and support the needs of their children;
- ongoing support to help parents overcome barriers to success in completing their case plan; and
- structured, curriculum-based peer support groups.

Each local program contract with the lead organization, and each local program must be locally administered by the county superior court or a nonprofit organization that serves as the hosts organization. A veteran parent lead provides program coordination and maintains local program information. The lead organization provides ongoing training to the host organizations, statewide program oversight and coordination, and maintains statewide program information.

A preliminary report on the program must be provided to the Legislature by December 1, 2016, and must contain, at a minimum, statistics showing rates of attendance at court hearings; compliance with court-ordered services and visitation; and whether participating in the program affected participants' overall understanding of the dependency court process. A subsequent report must be provided to the Legislature by December 1, 2019, and must also include statistics demonstrating the effect of the program on reunification rates and lengths of time families were engaged in the dependency court system before achieving permanency.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Committee/Commission/Task Force Created: No.

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

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: The Shelter Care Hearing can be overwhelming for the parents, and they need support to navigate through this juvenile dependency court system. This program gives the parents moral support, peer mentoring, and common sense support geared toward helping them succeed in this juvenile dependency process. Engaging parents in peer mentoring from the very first day of their juvenile court experience is an effective way to help these parents, who are facing the possibility of having their children taken away. The quicker that parents can be connected with quality support and services, the faster their children can grow and thrive. The program increases reunification rates, it lowers rates of terminations, and it increases compliance with court orders. These parents who have successfully navigated the system can be the most effective advocates for these parents in the juvenile dependency court system. This bill also provides for an evaluation tool that will help to assess the effectiveness of this program.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Commissioner Mark Hillman; Ryan Murrey, WA State CASA, Executive Director; Alise Hegle, John Martin, WA State Parent Advocacy Committee; Tonia Morrison, WA State Parent Advocacy Coalition; Sophia Byrd McSherry, WA State Office of Public Defense; Patrick Dowd, Office of the Family & Children's Ombuds; Laurie Lippold, Partners for Our Children; Gina Enochs, citizen.