

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SHB 2525

As Passed Legislature

Title: An act relating to establishing the family connections program.

Brief Description: Establishing the family connections program.

Sponsors: House Committee on Human Services & Early Learning (originally sponsored by Representatives Callan, Corry, Eslick, Springer, Orwall, Ortiz-Self, Shewmake, Goodman, Senn, Caldier, Dent, Leavitt, Davis, Doglio, J. Johnson and Pollet).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Human Services & Early Learning: 1/24/20, 1/29/20 [DPS];
Appropriations: 2/8/20 [DPS(HSEL)].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 2/13/20, 97-0.
Passed Senate: 3/4/20, 47-0.
Passed Legislature.

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Requires the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) to contract with an external organization or organizations with experience serving youth or families receiving out-of-home care services to implement and operate the Family Connections Program (FCP) in one location in Eastern Washington and one location in Western Washington.
- Requires the DCYF to collect data and measure outcomes for families engaging in the FCP and provide a report to the Legislature that includes a plan for expanding the program by September 1, 2021.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES & EARLY LEARNING

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 13 members: Representatives Senn, Chair; Callan, Vice Chair; Frame, Vice Chair; Dent, Ranking Minority Member; Eslick, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; McCaslin, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Corry, Goodman, Griffey, Kilduff, Klippert, Lovick and Ortiz-Self.

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.

Staff: Luke Wickham (786-7146).

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Majority Report: The substitute bill by Committee on Human Services & Early Learning be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 31 members:

Representatives Ormsby, Chair; Robinson, 1st Vice Chair; Bergquist, 2nd Vice Chair; Stokesbary, Ranking Minority Member; MacEwen, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Rude, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Caldier, Chandler, Chopp, Cody, Dolan, Dye, Fitzgibbon, Hansen, Hoff, Hudgins, Kilduff, Kraft, Macri, Mosbrucker, Pettigrew, Pollet, Ryu, Schmick, Senn, Steele, Sullivan, Sutherland, Tarleton, Tharinger and Ybarra.

Staff: Mary Mulholland (786-7391).

Background:

If an individual suspects that a child has been abused or neglected, that abuse or neglect can be reported to the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) Child Protective Services (CPS) office or to law enforcement. There are many individuals who are required by law to report suspected abuse or neglect.

The CPS will then determine whether the report of child abuse or neglect is credible and whether the report meets the sufficiency screening criteria. If the report meets the screening criteria, the CPS will assign either: (1) a 24-hour response that includes an investigation; or (2) a family assessment response for low to moderate risk allegations that requires a 72-hour response.

The DCYF, or anyone else, can file a court petition alleging that the child should be a dependent of the state due to abuse, neglect, or because no parent, guardian, or custodian is capable of adequately caring for the child. A court will hold a shelter care hearing following removal of a child from his or her home within 72 hours. At this hearing, the court will determine if the child can return home safely.

Child Welfare Parents for Parents Program.

The Parents for Parents (PFP) program provides outreach and support to parents at dependency-related hearings, beginning with the shelter care hearing from other parents who have successfully resolved the issues that led the parent's child into the care of the juvenile dependency court system, resulting in family reunification or another permanency outcome.

Child Welfare Housing Assistance Pilot Program.

The DCYF must establish a child welfare housing assistance pilot program (CWHAPP) by July 1, 2020, that provides housing support to eligible families. For the purposes of the pilot, the DCYF must consult with a stakeholder group to create eligibility criteria, including creating a definition of homelessness for the purposes of the program.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

The DCYF is required, beginning September 1, 2020, to contract with an external organization or organizations with experience serving youth or families receiving out-of-home care services to implement and operate the Family Connections Program (FCP) in:

- one location west of the crest of the Cascade Mountains; and
- one location east of the crest of the Cascade Mountains.

The FCP must facilitate interaction between a parent of a child found to be dependent and in out-of-home care and the individual with whom the child is placed. The FCP must also determine whether an in-person meeting between a parent of a child found to be dependent and in out-of-home care and the individual with whom the child is placed is appropriate by considering whether:

- the parent of a child found to be dependent and in out-of-home care and the individual with whom the child is placed are willing to participate in an in-person meeting; and
- safety concerns exist such that an in-person meeting should not occur.

If the FCP determines that an in-person meeting should occur, the FCP must provide a referral to the FCP team, which must:

- ensure that the parent ally contact the parent to prepare for an in-person meeting between the parent and caregiver;
- ensure that the experienced caregiver contact the caregiver to prepare for an in-person meeting between the parent and caregiver;
- convene an in-person meeting between the parent and caregiver; and
- provide ongoing support to the parent and caregiver following the in-person meeting.

The DCYF must collect data and measure outcomes for families engaging in the FCP and provide a report to the Legislature that includes a plan for expanding the program by September 1, 2021.

The term "child welfare parent mentor" that currently exists in statute in reference to the PFP program and the CWHAPP is replaced with the term "parent ally."

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Human Services & Early Learning):

(In support) Caregivers would like to know more about the children that they are caring for, while parents whose children have been removed want more information about the people with whom their child is staying. Fear should not dominate foster care culture. This bill works to remove the fear that exists in foster care culture. Coparenting will improve the likelihood of reunification. When parents and caregivers have relationships, this allows caregivers to become mentors to the family as a whole. Youth are experiencing loss when put into a stranger's house. When children are reunified, they experience that loss again.

When caregivers and birth parents build relationships, some of this trauma will be reduced. When parents and caregivers are connected, the child's well being is supported. This is currently the exception rather than the norm. This bill seeks to encourage that connection. Foster families, relative caregivers, and birth parents have difficult experiences with the child welfare system. When there is a relationship between caregivers and birth parents, exceptional results follow. Without this relationship there is often conflict and a litigious culture. This program was created by the DCYF, caregivers, parents, and providers. This is the kind of collaboration that was envisioned by the Blue Ribbon Commission. The FCP could be the beginning of creating a positive and supportive culture of foster care.

(Opposed) None.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Appropriations):

(In support) Parents need support and love just as much as their children. Assumptions about birth parents often aren't correct. Positive relationships between birth parents and foster parents can create extended families that are simple to the children who know the love of the people in their life. Too often, the separate sets of parents operate in silos and have adversarial relationships. The proposed voluntary program will combine the experiences of stakeholders with different perspectives. The program will reduce trauma to children, help retain experienced foster parents, and expedite paths to permanency for foster children.

The program can truly and positively change the culture of foster care. It will help ensure that the integrity of the model is preserved and that outcomes are realized. The hope is to evaluate the program and see its positive impact. It is worth the investment.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying (Human Services & Early Learning): Representative Callan, prime sponsor; Katie Biron; Dorothy Gorder; Courtney Canova, Children's Home Society of Washington; Jennifer Gears, Kindering; Caren Goldenberg, King County Dependency Court Appointed Special Advocate Program; and Sydney Forrester, Office of the Governor.

Persons Testifying (Appropriations): Katie Biron; and Laurie Lippold, Partners for Our Children.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Human Services & Early Learning): None.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Appropriations): None.