

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5331

As of January 28, 2021

Title: An act relating to establishing an early childhood court program for young children and their families involved or at risk of becoming involved in Washington's child welfare system.

Brief Description: Establishing an early childhood court program for young children and their families involved or at risk of becoming involved in Washington's child welfare system.

Sponsors: Senators Gildon, Darneille, Dhingra, Hasegawa, Nguyen, Nobles, Warnick, Wellman and Wilson, C..

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Human Services, Reentry & Rehabilitation: 1/28/21.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Establishes the Early Childhood Court Program (ECCP) which superior courts may implement to serve the needs of infants and toddlers in the dependency system.
- Creates training requirements for judicial officers hearing cases in an ECCP.
- Directs the Administrative Office of the Courts to administer the training requirements and, if funding is available, evaluate the ECCPs.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES, REENTRY & REHABILITATION

Staff: Alison Mendiola (786-7488)

Background: Dependency Court. Anyone, including the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), may file a petition in court alleging that a child should be a dependent of the state due to abuse, neglect, or because there is no parent, guardian, or

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custodian capable of adequately caring for the child. These petitions must be verified and contain a statement of facts that constitute a dependency and the names and residence of the parents, if known.

If a court determines that a child is dependent, the court will conduct periodic reviews and make determinations regarding the child's placement, the provision of services by DCYF, compliance of the parents, and whether progress has been made by the parents.

If the parent fails to make progress in curing the parental deficiencies which led to the dependency, or if one of the statutory aggravating factors exist, a termination petition may be filed. Federal law requires that after a child has been in foster care for 15 of the past 22 months, the state must file a petition to terminate parental rights unless the child is being cared for by relatives, there is a compelling reason why termination would not be in the best interest of the child, or the state has failed to offer the necessary services to the parent.

If the court finds the statutory grounds for termination are met, the court will terminate the parental rights and the parent will no longer have rights, privileges, or obligations toward the child.

National Baby Court Models. Zero to Three is a national organization dedicated to working on issues related to increasing the well-being of babies and toddlers. The Zero to Three National Infant-Toddler Court Program is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Zero to Three reports that there are infant-toddler court programs at 99 sites throughout 30 states and of the 680,000 children in foster care in the U.S., 31 percent are age three and younger. Zero to Three also designed the Safe Babies Court Team in 2005, which focuses on reducing trauma and improving how court, child welfare, and child-serving organizations work together to support young children in, or at-risk of entering, the child welfare system.

In Washington State, children under the age of three represent 42 percent of dependency cases filed in 2018. Of all children who entered into care in Washington, 25.6 percent are infants under one year, the second highest rate in the country.

Best for Babies Program. The Pierce County Juvenile Court operates the Best for Babies Program which is a court-based program designed to ensure that infants and toddlers entering foster care receive support and services to help ensure safety, wellbeing, and an environment that supports early brain development, a Safe Babies Court Team approach. The Best for Babies Program started in 2016, and ensures the needs of infants and toddlers in dependency are addressed through:

- regular support and community team meetings with infants' and toddlers' parents and families;
- building trusting relationships between parents, caregivers, legal team, judges, and advocates;
- frequent court hearings with the same judge and social worker;

- increased family time for infants, toddlers and parents; and
- referral of every child to early intervention services.

Summary of Bill: The Legislature finds there is an urgent need to provide greater supports to young children and their families involved or at risk of becoming involved in Washington's child welfare system. The Legislature also finds that early childhood court programs minimize the impact of past trauma and prevents future trauma for young children and their families in the child welfare system by providing timely, research-based, and trauma informed interventions. Statewide standards are necessary to the quality and accountability of research-based interventions of early childhood court programs.

Early Childhood Court Program. A superior court may establish an early childhood court program (EECP) to serve the needs of infants and toddlers in the dependency system. If a superior court creates an EECP, it is to incorporate the following core components into the program:

- judicial and child welfare leadership;
- local community coordinator;
- active community team;
- post-removal conferences and family team meetings;
- meeting the parents where they are;
- frequent, quality family time;
- concurrent planning; and
- systemic commitment to continuous learning and improvement.

Training Requirements. Judges of the superior court judicial districts with ECCPs are to adopt local rules directing programs. The local court rules are to include a requirement that all judicial officers hearing cases in ECCPs:

- complete an initial eight hour training program that can include topic areas of the benefits of secure attachment with primary caregivers; a trauma-informed approach; the importance of maintaining children with their biological connections; the importance of reunification of children with their families; and the impact of trauma on child development; and
- after the initial training, annually attend a minimum of eight hours of continuing education of pertinence to the ECCP.

The Administrative Office of the Courts. The Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) is to administer the certification of training requirements. Pursuant to available funding, the AOC is to evaluate the ECCPs 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.

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: This bill provides the framework for superior courts to adopt ECCPs, promoting the emotional well-being of the infants and toddlers being a top priority. There will be less anxiety and stress for both the children and the parents. Permanency will be achieved in a more timely manner, which is better for everyone involved and saves money. Infants and toddlers are overrepresented in dependencies. Washington has the second highest rate of dependency children under the age of one in the country. COVID has threatened the stability of families—this will help everyone navigate the dependency process in a way that is more engaging and supportive of families. Washington is considered a leader in early education policies based on science and research. There is a program in Pierce County, also modeled after the Zero to Three national model. Adopting this state-wide model will help this model expand, and help with private and local funding efforts. This model incorporates the voice of those with lived experience in the child welfare system. Some parents never had a chance to parent, the increased communication and family involvement this model emphasizes will change this. Early exit from dependency means better outcomes and lower costs.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Chris Gildon, Prime Sponsor; Rachel Sottile, Center for Children and Youth Justice; Ruth Kagi, Representative, Children’s Campaign Fund; Heather Cantamessa, Re-Unify Family Solutions LLC.

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