

Catalyst for Kids

Priority - Increase early engagement of parents in services and active involvement in decision-making.

Why this is important

There is evidence that early and ongoing engagement of parents whose children have become involved with the child welfare system expedites the child's return to his/her family - either through reunification or through living with kin on a permanent basis. The federal Child and Family Service Review of all fifty states found a significant association between at-least-monthly casework/parent visits and case outcomes, including achievement of permanence, parent involvement in case planning, and parents receiving needed service. Notwithstanding these documented benefits, many barriers remain to achieving this goal. These include:

Parental Drug Involvement - Throughout the country, parental use of methamphetamine is creating an explosion in foster care. Nationally, close to 1/3 of all children now in foster care are there for this reason. Early engagement of drug-involved parents in planning for and supporting their child(ren) in placement presents daunting challenges. Compounding these challenges is the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act mandate to begin termination of parental rights proceedings on behalf of any child who has been in foster care for 15 out of the past 22 months. If it is fair to assume that most drug-involved parents are able, without drugs, to provide safely and well for their children, it is necessary to find strategies that promote this outcome.

Parental Confusion with the System - Birth parents do not understand how the dependency system operates. Workload often prevents parents' attorneys from supporting and guiding their clients. Families who do not understand their legal requirements and rights, or what to do regarding services, visits and other issues, can get easily confused, frustrated and discouraged.

Inconsistent use of Family Meetings - HB3085 established as a policy of the state the need to encourage and support meaningful family involvement in the decision making related to planning for children involved in the child welfare system. The bill directs DSHS to establish the goal of using Family Decision Meetings as soon as possible following the child's involvement in the child welfare system. Whether families identify a viable relative placement for the child or simply strengthen placement stability through their involvement, family presence leads to improved outcomes. Many types of family meetings exist to engage family members in initial placement decisions, reunification efforts and permanency planning.

Lack of Paternal Involvement - While there is considerable evidence that positive interaction with their fathers promotes improved academic and behavioral outcomes for children, fathers are rarely identified, located or encouraged (if appropriate) to have meaningful relationships with their children. When a father isn't involved, it is a missed opportunity to locate extended family and to explore options for potential placement or other involvement in the child's life. Many of the fathers who are contacted could play a significant role in a child's life but lack the support necessary to do so. Barriers to father involvement include challenges of time and systems that essentially overlook the existence of the father.

Desired Results

- A significant and inclusive search for supportive family members is the norm whenever a child enters the child welfare system.
- Parents and family members help create and support plans for parents' services and for children's placement, reunification and/or other plan for permanency.
- Birth parents understand the system and receive the support they need to make informed decisions.
- Relationships between children in the system and their fathers are encouraged, as appropriate.
- Effective treatment for people with substance abuse problems is readily available.

Response Highlights ~ Throughout the state diverse stakeholders are responding to these needs. Examples include:

Family Drug Court ~ Several Washington State counties use Family Drug Courts, increasingly recognized as an effective early intervention with drug-involved parents. As an alternative to incarceration, and with the goal of child safety and early permanence, in Family Drug Courts all team members - prosecutors, defenders, social workers and community service providers - collaborate to provide parents the incentives, sanctions and supports they need to address their chemical dependency issues and parenting deficiencies. Strong judicial oversight holds parents accountable for their participation in rigorous, structured programming that includes frequent court appearances, substance abuse treatment, drug testing, training, education, parenting, and counseling. Noncompliance can result in incarceration. Preliminary data in an evaluation of the Pierce County Drug Court indicate outcomes, including higher rates of reunification, length of stay in foster care that is consistent with other children, and decreased foster care costs.

Parental Dependency Representation ~ A pilot program of the Washington State Office of Public Defense, conducted in Pierce and Benton/Franklin Counties, demonstrated that adequate funding for public defenders, coupled with appropriate caseload and other standards, resulted in a substantial increase in reunification between birth families and their children who were placed in foster care. The state's 2005-2007 biennium budget allocated \$5 million to expand upon this pilot, and the Governor's 2006 budget request includes \$11 million to expand the Parent Representation Program to all counties.

Family Team Decision Making ~ In Family Team Decision Making, birth families participate with community members, resource families, service providers and agency staff in all meetings that involve placement decisions regarding their child. Initial team meetings take place within 72 hours of a child's entry into the child welfare system. In Washington State, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation as well as local support, Family Team Decision Making meetings are being implemented in 7 DCFS offices. These offices collectively oversee 42% of the children in placement in the state. Data on related child and family outcomes will be available in 2006.

Fatherhood Forums ~ During Fall 2005, a series of regional Fatherhood Forums was conducted throughout the state. The purpose was to educate community stakeholders about the benefits of father engagement, to explore models for such engagement, and to identify systemic barriers, and related solutions, to increased involvement of fathers in the lives of their children who are in foster care. The forums were well received, and there is considerable interest in maintaining and expanding upon the work that was begun in 2005.

Relative Search ~ Several DCFS offices throughout the state have allocated staff time to search for relatives of children who are entering care or are in placement. The Bremerton Children's Administration office increased its placement of children with relatives from 28% of all placements to 42% of all placements following its dedicated focus on this activity.

Kinship Care Coalitions ~ Throughout the state, coalitions of public and private stakeholders are creating improved systems to support relatives who provide care for family members whose parents are unable to adequately provide for them.

Action Needed in 2006

- Support the Children's Administration in its expanded use of Family Team Decision Meetings
- Support efforts to increase involvement of children and parents in major decisions regarding their children.
- Work on strategies to increase the frequency of parent/child visits, early identification of relatives, and support for kinship providers.
- Continue the focus on fatherhood involvement, including policies, practices and models that support the most positive outcomes.