

FINDING FATHERS

IN DEPENDENCY CASES

Establishing paternity early in a child's life has been demonstrated to positively impact dependency case processing and outcomes for children.

In the majority of dependency cases where paternity is a question, the process for establishing biological paternity is handled by the Support Enforcement Division of the Prosecuting Attorney's office. On average, support enforcement orders are entered after a six-month process (because support enforcement orders are retroactive under RCW 26.26.150, timeliness is not as critical as for dependency cases).

Dependency case processing allows a very limited period of time for parents to establish legal party status, participate in services, correct any parental deficiencies, and secure placement of the child. The strictly limited timeline increases the importance that alleged fathers establish paternity as soon as possible.

The Finding Fathers project provides courts with reliable, fast, and low-cost DNA testing for alleged fathers in dependency cases.

"Fathers' involvement is associated with improved child well-being and lower levels of child behavior problems, and children with involved fathers are less likely to re-enter the child welfare system."

-Washington State Dependency Best Practices Report, Commissioned by the Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care



Positive Impacts:

- Early engagement by father
- Expand pool of relative placements and resources
- Earlier case resolutions of all permanency types
- Reduction in overall judicial workload due to fewer hearings

The Establishing Biological Paternity Early Pilot Project provided several juvenile courts in Washington State with an opportunity to secure paternity testing early in the process. During the project, testing was performed on alleged fathers and children (motherless testing) in individual cases. Test fees were paid through the Administrative Office of the Courts Court Improvement Program grant funding. The juvenile courts in Cowlitz, Clark, Pierce, Thurston, and Snohomish Counties participated in this project, which started in August of 2014 and ended on July 31, 2016. The project succeeded in showing a significant reduction in the waiting time from filing the dependency petition to entering the DNA results:

Pierce County Project

Pierce County has continued their testing program with the following results during Project Period: 1/1/2017 – 12/31/17
 Alleged fathers are tested at the courthouse directly after court, creating efficiency in obtaining the DNA samples.

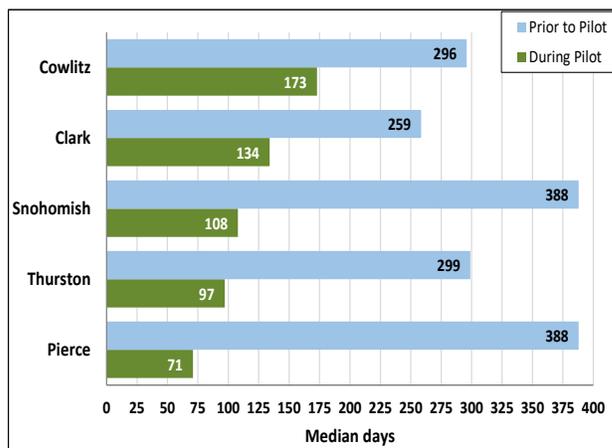
Number of cases with completed testing: 126

Median time between order for genetic test and results: 14 Days

Cost savings as a direct result of Finding Fathers (2017):

- 11 children placed with biological father.
- 20 children placed with paternal relatives.
- 81 cases did NOT require publication due to having an identified biological father.
- 21 alleged fathers were dismissed as they were not a genetic match. Services which had been referred for non-biological fathers were cancelled. With the dismissal of alleged fathers dependency professionals had more time to spend on other cases.

Differences in the Median Waiting Time between Filing a Dependency Petition and DNA Results Prior to the Pilot and During the Pilot by Court



The project also showed a significant cost-savings in paternity testing prices and reduced costs for publication. In cases that include an alleged father the Attorney General’s Office publishes legal advertisements designed to provide notice to fathers when their identity or location is unknown. Each County Clerk’s Office pays the newspaper for the legal notice to be published, which varies, but averages around \$500. The paternity testing program has proved to be less expensive and significantly more timely than publishing in local newspapers. For the most part, the courts were able to direct an alleged father to be tested on site, ensuring that paternity could be established (or disestablished) in a timely manner.

The State of Washington contracts with Labcorp to provide genetic testing services:

\$30 per test if the DNA sample is collected by the lab

\$25 per test if the DNA sample is collected by the agency

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