

EVERETT HERALD

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COMMENTARY

## Cuts will hurt legal program for children

By Thomas J. Wynne

How do you measure success? For one teen in Snohomish County, success can be measured by graduation from high school. Lots of young adults can measure that accomplishment in their lives, but for one who has been in foster care since age 15, the struggle has been harder than most. This particular teen struggled with severe mental health and behavioral issues, but luckily a person came into the teen's life, a volunteer guardian ad litem who was assigned the case. This teen had to endure placements from Bellingham to Olympia and across the water to a home on the Peninsula, moves that would have daunted even adults. The volunteer tirelessly advocated for the teen's mental health services, medication reviews and educational services to ensure the teen was not only safe, but also had an opportunity to grow and thrive. Today, most of the medications are no longer necessary, and the teen has a bright future.

This success would not have been possible without Snohomish County's Volunteer Guardian Ad Litem, a group of community-spirited volunteers who serve as mandatory guardians ad litem for children who have been removed from their homes due to allegations of abuse or neglect. Yet, the VGAL program, and other worthwhile programs like it, are in danger of being eliminated if the Senate budget is adopted by the Legislature. The Legislature requires appointment of guardians ad litem for children in dependency, which in many counties is provided by VGAL volunteers, rather than the alternative of more expensive attorneys. VGAL volunteers have saved states and counties millions by leveraging public funding. In addition, they bring their hearts and souls into the process.

Washington is 50th out of 50 states -- dead last -- for the money the state spends on our trial courts where VGAL programs are provided. Regrettably, the state's contribution to the entire judicial branch is 7/10th of one percent of the state operating budget -- an abysmal failure on the part of the state to provide adequate resources for the court system. Now, the Senate budget proposes another cut -- \$7.9 million to the Administrative Office of the Courts, the state agency for the judicial branch that handles the dollars, such as for VGAL, that pass through AOC to the trial courts. If implemented, the Senate budget proposal would result in a 31.2 percent cut to AOC this year alone, and astoundingly, a 43 percent reduction to AOC since 2009. It also will sound the death knell for programs such as VGAL.

Legislators will argue that the cuts are only 5 percent, the same as executive state agencies. Yet, that is not true. 64 percent of the AOC budget is either constitutionally protected or protected by the Legislature through provisos. As a result, the cuts proposed in the Senate budget come entirely from the remaining 36 percent: direct court services and pass throughs, such as the VGAL program. Other pass-throughs in danger include court interpreters for those who cannot understand English and would not otherwise know what is happening in court; a contribution to the salaries of district and qualifying municipal court judges who preside over trials involving state statutes; and funding for Clerk's Office staff to collect legal financial obligations, a program that brings in millions of dollars for the state

and the counties. The House budget is much kinder to the court system, but it proposes a \$12 million cut in truancy funding. The statute, known as the Becca Bill, was passed to keep kids in school and help families with at-risk children. High school dropouts are 75 percent more likely to wind up as state prison inmates and 59 percent more likely to be federal inmates. Either the state continues to fund the Becca program, or we will spend money when these youth make their way to the court system as criminal offenders. It is unacceptable that the judicial branch -- a co-equal branch of government -- is provided so little to run our statewide court system -- only 7/10th of one percent of the state's operating budget -- and is now being threatened with even more cuts. Justice in Washington is in jeopardy. The programs that serve the children and others are in jeopardy. Don't close the courthouse doors for those who need these services. We urge the Legislature to maintain funding the trial courts.

*Thomas J. Wynne is a Snohomish County Superior Court judge.*