

Opinion

## **An effective, vital program**

Any length of time a child spends in the uncertainty of foster care is too much, but it is particularly wrenching when that time is extended because of avoidable and costly delays in connecting children and parents with the help they need.

The judicial branch can't stop family crises from happening, but we can and we have reduced the amount of time Washington children spend in foster care through the Parents Representation Program (PRP). This innovative justice program has been remarkably effective at helping parents access services, improving the efficiency of dependency hearings, speeding up reunifications and adoptions and saving money.

The program is now being recommended for the state budget chopping block. While many worthwhile programs will be lost during the coming legislative sessions, this is one that should not be cut.

The PRP has been evaluated multiple times since its 2000 launch and each study has shown its amazing effectiveness at reducing the time Washington children spend in foster care. One study conducted by the Office of Public Defense and audited by the Washington State Center for Court Research showed a 36 percent increase in the rate of family reunifications when parents are represented by PRP attorneys.

The most recent independent study by the research organization Partners for Our Children (through the University of Washington School of Social Work) showed children in foster care either reunited with their parents an average of one month earlier than without the program – a significant time in the life of a child – or were adopted into new families a full year earlier.

The leader of that study, Dr. Mark Courtney, wrote to lawmakers in November: "These findings are striking; precious few interventions have been shown to have any positive impact on the lives of children in foster care, let alone impacts of this magnitude."

In a recent budget reduction document, Gov. Chris Gregoire suggested eliminating the PRP. While I understand the extreme difficulty facing the state, cutting the approximately \$12 million annual budget of this program would not save the state those dollars; it would only shift the funding from reunification and permanency to higher foster care costs.

A little background might be helpful.

In the late 1990s, more and more children were entering foster care and "dependency" cases – where the fate of dependent children is determined – were bogging down in court, leaving children and families in limbo for many months or even years. Washington lawmakers in 1999 directed the state Office of Public Defense to study the issue. The

study showed that attorneys representing parents whose children had been removed were often overwhelmed and undertrained. Counties paid for parent representation out of tight budgets, which varied widely from county to county. The state paid nothing. Public defense attorneys who should have less than 100 dependency cases often juggled well over 200 cases with no additional resources, such as access to social workers or experts.

As one judge told me, “These are state cases and frankly, the counties should never have been funding parent representation.”

Dependency hearings were often “continued” – delayed – because overworked defense attorneys could not make it to court. Lack of adequate representation also meant many parents were not accessing the training they needed to be better, stronger parents.

The initial study expressed deep concerns by judges and social workers that many parents with the potential and motivation to improve their parenting skills and lifestyles were falling by the wayside because they weren’t provided true opportunities to participate meaningfully in their own cases.

After receiving the initial report, Washington lawmakers budgeted for a pilot program designed and overseen by the Office of Public Defense.

The Parents Representation Program provides state funding to counties to hire attorneys, sets a dependency case limit of 80 for each attorney, provides access to experts and social workers so parents are better able to participate in services, and sets standards that reduce continuances and increase communication between attorneys and parents.

Since that time, the PRP has been so successful lawmakers have expanded it to 25 counties, including Spokane and Pend Oreille.

“I dread a return to the prior system,” one Eastern Washington judicial officer told me upon learning that the PRP could be eliminated.

Spokane County Superior Court Commissioner Joseph Valente said, “Effective parent representation paid for by the state actually saves money. It allows us to move cases to resolution faster. If cases languish in an understaffed and overloaded system, no one wins and money will not be saved.”

These judges and court officials are deeply concerned about the potential loss of the program. The courts will certainly absorb a share of cuts in the coming legislative session, but for reasons of humanity, justice and cost savings, the Parent Representation Program should not be one of them.

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