Restructure the child-welfare system

The status quo in Washington’s child welfare system is not working. The Legislature should restructure services into a new Department of Children, Youth and Families.

By Seattle Times editorial board

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WASHINGTON spends about $500 million a year on its child welfare safety net, and most of that is spent after a family is already in crisis. Social workers, often carrying untenable caseloads, are squeezed between their professional commitment to protect vulnerable kids and the fractures in society caused by intergenerational poverty and substance abuse.

Their work is complicated by Washington’s siloed approach to children and families. Those workers are employed by the mega-sized Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), while separate state departments handle early learning and health services. Preventive, wraparound services for at-risk kids are often an afterthought.
This year, the Legislature is plowing ahead with a smart, comprehensive reform of the child-welfare system. A new Department of Children, Youth and Families would merge the child-welfare and juvenile-justice systems with the department overseeing early learning and child care.

The approach makes sense because Washington isn’t getting good enough results from the status quo.

DSHS continually lurches from one crisis to another — most recently, in the mental-health system — while the child welfare safety net suffers. Foster parents have fled the system, resulting in a shortage of homes so acute that abused and neglected kids just removed from their homes are put in hotels. King County’s child welfare offices have seen turnover as high as 30 percent, according to a recent investigation by the online news site Crosscut.

Charles Loeffler, a Seattle-based social worker, told the Legislature last week that high stress, low pay and untenable caseloads result in “a revolving door of social workers in this vital area of public need.” Three years into the job, Loeffler said he is considered a senior worker in the office.

Restructuring the system won’t solve funding gaps, and will cost at least $10 million in the short term. But it would create a new cabinet-level secretary solely focused on youth services. It would also shift the state’s focus toward early intervention, reflecting brain research which shows how preventing childhood trauma saves costs to society down the road.

The restructuring plan started with Gov. Jay Inslee, and has been endorsed by the Legislature’s longtime child welfare leader, Rep. Ruth Kagi, D-Seattle. Sen. Steve O’Ban, R-Lakewood, has a few smart tweaks, including rigorous accountability standards for a new department.

This is a tremendous opportunity for the state to do better. A decade of court oversight from a class-action lawsuit known as the Braam decision certainly hasn’t fixed the foster-care system.

Now, foster kids have third-grade reading levels at least 20 points lower than students not in foster care, and just 2.6 percent of kids in foster care graduate from college within four years of finishing high school.

With limited resources and a crisis-focused approach, the child welfare system too often simply skips over teenagers. The rate of children age 10 or older taken into state care has plunged in the past decade, and Washington has the fourth-lowest rate in the nation of older adolescents in foster care. They’re often left to the streets.

The state would get better outcomes if it responds with a prevention-first approach.
We know what we’re getting from the status quo. The Legislature, and the state, owe these kids a better outcome.

Editorial board members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Donna Gordon Blankinship, Brier Dudley, Mark Higgins, Jonathan Martin, William K. Blethen (emeritus) and Robert C. Blethen (emeritus).