

November 2018

## Evaluation of the Short-Term Foster Care Support Services Program: *Preliminary Report*

The 2017 Washington State Legislature established a new program to support foster parents. The program is intended to allow active foster parents access to temporary short-term support services from organizations in their local communities. The legislature appropriated funds for the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) Children’s Administration—now the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF)—to contract with non-profit community-based organizations to implement the new program.

The legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) to evaluate the new program, specifically to “assess the impact of the short-term support services . . . on the retention of foster homes and the number of placements a foster child receives while in out-of-home care as well as the return on investment to the state.”<sup>1</sup>

The legislation required WSIPP to provide two reports. This preliminary report describes the program and initial program implementation, presents descriptive information regarding families utilizing the service to date, outlines broad plans for WSIPP’s outcome evaluation, and identifies potential data limitations.

The final report is due to the legislature by June 2020.

### Summary

The 2017 Washington State Legislature established a new support services program wherein active foster parents may receive temporary short-term support services from an organization in their local community.

The legislature directed WSIPP to evaluate the impact of the program on foster home retention and foster youth placement stability and calculate the return on investment to the state. These findings will be published in a final report due by June 2020.

In this preliminary report, we describe the program and initial implementation.

Two community-based agencies in northwest Washington began offering services in June 2018. Figures in this report, therefore, describe service utilization during the initial four months of the program.

From June through September 2018, a total of 13 families requested, and 8 families received, a range of support services through this program.

Suggested citation: Goodvin, R. (2018). *Evaluation of the short-term foster care case aides program: Interim report* (Document Number 18-11-3202). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

<sup>1</sup> Second Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5890, Chapter 20, Laws of 2017, 3<sup>rd</sup> Special Session, p. 2.

## I. Program Description

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The 2017 Washington State Legislature established a new program of temporary and flexible short-term support services for foster parents. The program was intended to allow licensed foster parents, regardless of specific child needs, to access specific supports provided by organizations in their local communities.

Authorizing legislation establishing this program provides broad guidance but allows many details to be determined by DCYF and the non-profit community-based organizations administering the service. Specific programs may, accordingly, vary depending on location. In this section, we focus on the parameters outlined in the legislation. The complete authorizing legislation is included for reference at the end of this report.

The new program allows any foster parent with an active license and at least one foster youth placed in their home to request access to support services, “with the overall goal of supporting the parental efforts of the foster parents.”<sup>2</sup> Specific services to be provided were not specified in legislation.

Foster parents may request support for an individual child, for multiple children, or for assistance to the family. Foster families may contact an organization providing short-term support services, or the organization may conduct outreach to offer assistance to foster families.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

### **Legislative Assignment**

*...the Washington state institute for public policy shall prepare an outcome evaluation of the short-term support described in this subsection. The evaluation will, to the maximum extent possible, assess the impact of the short-term support services described in this subsection on the retention of foster homes and the number of placements a foster child receives while in out-of-home care as well as the return on investment to the state. The institute shall submit a preliminary report to the appropriate committees of the legislature and the governor by December 1, 2018, that describes the initial implementation of these services and descriptive statistics of the families utilizing these services. A final report shall be submitted to the appropriate committees of the legislature by June 30, 2020.*

*Second Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5890, Chapter 20, Laws of 2017, 3<sup>rd</sup> Special Session*

The authorizing legislation specified that the contracted organizations would staff the support services program with case aides<sup>3</sup> and would conduct background checks and provide training.

The contracted organizations are also responsible for determining access to services and for developing a prioritization system if the requests exceed funding or staffing capacity.

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<sup>3</sup> As defined in program contracts, “case aide” refers to “an individual in the employment of a CPA, Tribal Social Service Program or other non-profit organization. This position provides temporary assistance as requested to foster parents and the children placed in their care..., must meet all education, training, age, experience, and background requirements prior to their assignment to assist a foster family... [and] work under close and regular supervision....”

Although some existing programs provide support services to foster parents and children, those services are primarily available for children with exceptional needs. *Foster care child support aides* are available for support of a specific child with behavioral or developmental needs who require intense one-on-one supervision to remain in a foster home.<sup>4</sup> In a separate program, *child specific respite* may be used to provide licensed foster parents relief from caregiving responsibilities linked to medical, behavioral, or special needs of an individual child.<sup>5</sup> In both cases, service eligibility is based on the documented presence of child needs and requires caseworker referral and authorization consistent with the child's written service plan. In contrast, the new short-term support services program is intended to be available to any licensed foster parent, regardless of child need, and do not require caseworker approval.

Additionally, the new short-term support services differ from *retention respite*, which is available to provide all licensed foster parents with regular or emergent time off from caregiving responsibilities.<sup>6</sup>

Retention respite care is typically provided by another licensed foster care provider, is authorized by the day, and includes overnight care. In contrast, short-term support services are provided by case aides (with specific qualifications determined by DCYF and contracted organizations), are billed on an hourly basis, and explicitly exclude overnight assistance.

### Program Funding

The 2017 Washington State Legislature allocated, from a combination of state and federal general funds, \$540,000 in state fiscal year 2018 and \$540,000 in state fiscal year 2019 for the short-term support services program.<sup>7</sup>

Contracted organizations bill DCYF at an hourly service rate of \$35.00, including for travel time. Organizations may also bill for activity fees of up to \$15.00 per youth activity.

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<sup>4</sup> DCYF. *Practices and procedures for private child placing agencies*.

<sup>5</sup> See DCYF for more information on [respite care](#).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>7</sup> Substitute Senate Bill 5883, Chapter 1, Laws of 2017, 3<sup>rd</sup> Special Session.

## II. Initial Implementation

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### Implementation Timeline

The DSHS Children’s Administration<sup>8</sup> issued a Request for Information (RFI) in late October 2017 to collect information about potential contractors. Responses were due in late November 2017, with an initial goal of executing contracts on January 1, 2018.

Although the program was intended to operate statewide, agencies responding to the RFI covered only five counties in western Washington, with some potential duplication of geographic coverage. DSHS moved forward with implementing the short-term support services as a regional pilot program with two community-based organizations covering two counties. These programs are discussed in the next section.

Proposals submitted by other organizations did not meet the intent of the program outlined in the legislation. DCYF intends to offer additional opportunities for agencies to become contracted providers of this program before June 2019.<sup>9</sup>

Contract development for short-term support services required some negotiation, and contracts were executed in May 2018.

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<sup>8</sup> This program was initiated under the direction of the DSHS Children’s Administration, which is now part of the DCYF. Throughout this report we refer to agencies as appropriate for the particular phase of implementation discussed.

<sup>9</sup> Personal communication with B. Geiger, DCYF, Nov. 11, 2018.

### Programs

DSHS Children’s Administration contracted with Skookum Kids to provide services in Whatcom County and with Secret Harbor to provide services in Skagit County. Both are non-profit community-based child placing agencies already providing a range of services in their respective areas.

*Skookum Mentors.* Skookum Kids enacted the short-term support services program as a new program called “Skookum Mentors.” Foster parents, typically with a foster child age 5 to 18, may request a mentor to spend time with their child. Mentors are largely intended to provide recreational activity, academic support, and transportation services with the goals of developing a connection to the child and supporting the foster parents. Mentors are expected to meet with children two times per week for approximately two hours per meeting.

Skookum Kids intends for services to be provided by existing or newly hired staff and unpaid volunteers. All staff must meet the same requirements and receive the same training. Staff and volunteers typically have child care experience or are early career graduates in human services or psychology. Skookum Kids only submits billing invoices for services provided by paid staff.<sup>10</sup>

Skookum Kids’ initial contract is to provide services billable up to \$60,000 from June 2018 through June 2019.

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<sup>10</sup> All information about the Skookum Mentors program was provided through personal communication with R. Deck, Oct. 1, 2018 and Oct. 22, 2018.

*Secret Harbor Case Aide Program.* The “Case Aide Program” at Secret Harbor builds on existing agency resources, which have been used to provide support services mainly to foster youth receiving Behavioral Rehabilitation Services (BRS)<sup>11</sup> in Secret Harbor licensed foster homes. In the new program, any foster parent licensed in Skagit County may request case aide services for their child.

Secret Harbor staff work with foster parents to determine specifically what services would assist the family. Case aides are intended to provide recreational or academic support, transportation services, or child care.

Secret Harbor case aides must have a minimum of one-year professional experience working with children and preferably also hold at least an associate’s degree.<sup>12</sup>

Secret Harbor initial contract is to provide services billable up to \$27,400 from June 2018 through June 2019.

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<sup>11</sup> BRS is a temporary intensive service and treatment program for youth with high-level complex needs. See DCYF. *Practices and policies behavioral rehabilitation services.* Social workers negotiate case aide hours as part of contracted services for BRS cases, and Secret Harbor continues to provide case aide services to this population.

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<sup>12</sup> All information about the Secret Harbor Case Aides program was provided through personal communication with K. Morris, Sept. 31, 2018, Oct. 1, 2018, and Oct. 22, 2018.

### III. Families Utilizing Services

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For this report, we present descriptive information for families utilizing short-term support services from June 2018 through September 2018. This represents all data available to date and thus reflects service requests and encounters only during the initial four months of program implementation.

**Exhibit 1** shows service requests and utilization across both agencies. We include the number of families that requested services, the number of families that received services, the total number of hours of service provided, and the average number of service hours per family served. Although case aides are paid for travel time, the numbers presented here reflect only time for direct service provision.

From June through September 2018, a total of 13 foster families requested support services and 8 received services. Both organizations received fewer requests than anticipated during the first months of service provision.

More families requested support services than received services from June through September. A total of five families requested but did not receive services. Based on information from program records and additional communication with program staff, this occurred for several reasons.

Two requests for service were denied. Program records indicate that no case aide was available at the time. Requests from three additional families were accepted, but no services were scheduled.

In two of the three cases, the foster family did not follow through to schedule services, and in the remaining case, the foster child for whom services were requested was moved to a new placement.

#### **Exhibit 1**

Service Requests and Provision for both Skookum Kids & Secret Harbor

<b>June – September 2018</b>	
Total families requesting services	13
Total families receiving services	8
Total service hours provided	85.35
Average hours per family served	10.67

Note:

Source: Skookum Kids and Secret Harbor billing and service records.

The contracted organizations are required to track information about the broad types of support requested. Across both organizations, 7 of the 13 service requests were classified as a *request for support provided directly to a foster child or children* (which may include meeting social, behavioral, recreational, academic or transportation needs) and six were classified as *requests for providing child care support to the caregivers*.

Of the foster families requesting services, seven were licensed through the state's Department of License resources and five were licensed by private child placing agencies. Most families (7 of 12) requesting support services were licensed recently, in 2017 or 2018. The year of initial foster care license dates ranged from 2013 to 2018. One family's license type and initial license date had not yet been confirmed at time of data receipt.

## IV. WSIPP Outcome Evaluation: Considerations & Limitations

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The legislative assignment directing WSIPP to evaluate the new short-term support services program specified that outcomes should include “the retention of foster homes and the number of placements a foster child receives while in out-of-home care as well as the return on investment to the state.”<sup>13</sup> The final report is due to the legislature by June 2020.

To evaluate the impact of service provision on outcomes for participants, WSIPP would typically compare outcomes for a group receiving the service to a similar group not receiving the service. Ideally, we would create these groups using a randomized controlled trial—the “gold standard” experimental approach to estimating treatment effects. Random assignment to a group allows for direct comparison of outcomes between participants (treatment group) and non-participants (control group) because, in theory, the only difference between these groups would be random and not related to participant characteristics. Because we are unable to use a randomized controlled trial design in which foster parents and children are randomly assigned to treatment, WSIPP will instead use rigorous quasi-experimental methods to test the effects of short-term support services.

Implementation of short-term support services as a regional pilot program, rather than the statewide implementation initially intended, does not compromise WSIPP’s ability to conduct a rigorous outcome evaluation. Instead, initially implementing the program in a narrow geographic region may allow for greater flexibility in identifying a control group that did not receive services. However, it is also the case that a relatively small sample size and narrow geographic implementation will reduce the confidence with which we can generalize our results. With potential for wide variation in the geographic region and program design, findings from an evaluation of the regional pilot program may not fully represent the impact of future implementations of the short-term support services program.

WSIPP’s determination of the most appropriate research design and comparison groups will depend on how widely the program is implemented during the study period, as well as service saturation within the communities in which services are available. For example, if services are oversubscribed in regions where the program is available, it may be possible to identify comparison groups of families requesting but not receiving services.

If programs are not oversubscribed, a better approach might be to select comparison groups from other, similar geographic regions. However, because the program is available to any licensed foster parent, it would be challenging to identify the characteristics of foster parents *and* children

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<sup>13</sup> [Second Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5890, Chapter 20, Laws of 2017, 3<sup>rd</sup> Special Session, p. 2.](#)

who would be likely to participate, and thus constitute an appropriate comparison group.

An aggregate-level analysis—comparing overall rates of caregiver retention and youth placement stability for communities with and without a short-term support services program—may also be possible but would only be appropriate if communities offering the program achieve service saturation.

Broadly, WSIPP will compare placement stability for foster youth where families have access to support services with placement stability for similar youth whose families did not have access.

To the extent possible, given the program and report timelines, we will also evaluate whether access to short-term support services affects caregiver retention or the length of time that foster parents remain

licensed and with active placements. Foster licenses are typically active for three years, so for families whose license cycle started after early 2017, we would not expect to observe a license renewal during WSIPP's evaluation period. Depending on the characteristics of families receiving support services, this timeline may compromise our ability to report meaningfully on caregiver retention.

As previously mentioned, the legislative assignment also directed WSIPP to assess the return on investment to the state. In order to conduct this analysis, we must be able to value not only the cost of the program but also the long-term economic impact of the outcomes caused by the program. At this point, WSIPP has not yet developed a method to estimate the monetary value of caregiver retention or child placement stability; a return-on-investment analysis will depend on our future ability to do so.



## Acknowledgements

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WSIPP thanks Barb Geiger, Holly Luna, and Meri Waterhouse at DCYF for their thoughtful consideration of outcome evaluation needs in the initial and ongoing implementation of this program. We also thank Kaelen Morris and Barb Box at Secret Harbor, as well as Ray Deck III and Ellie Takemura at Skookum Kids for providing information about initial program implementation and service utilization.

### **Authorizing Legislation**

*For the purposes of this section, and subject to funding appropriated specifically for this purpose, short-term support shall include case aides who provide temporary assistance to foster parents as needed with the overall goal of supporting the parental efforts of the foster parents except that this assistance shall not include overnight assistance. The department shall contract with nonprofit community-based organizations in each region to establish a statewide pool of individuals to provide the support described in this subsection. These individuals shall be hired by the nonprofit community-based organization and shall have the appropriate training, background checks, and qualifications as determined by the department. Short-term support as described in this subsection shall be available to all licensed foster parents in the state as funding is available and shall be phased in by geographic region. To obtain the assistance of a case aide for this purpose, the foster parent may request the services from the nonprofit community-based organization and the nonprofit community-based organization may offer assistance to licensed foster families. If the requests for the short-term support provided in this subsection exceed the funding available, the nonprofit community-based organization shall have discretion to determine the assignment of case aides. The nonprofit community-based organization shall report all short-term support provided under this subsection to the department.*

Second Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5890, 3<sup>rd</sup> Special Session

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