

RCW 13.90.901 Findings—Intent—2017 c 279. (1) The legislature finds and declares the following:

(a) Washington law grants the superior courts jurisdiction to make judicial determinations regarding the custody and care of youth within the meaning of the federal immigration and nationality act. Pursuant to 8 U.S.C. Sec. 1101(b), the term "child" means an unmarried person under twenty-one years of age. Superior courts are empowered to make the findings necessary for a youth to petition the United States citizenship and immigration services for classification under 8 U.S.C. Sec. 1101(a) (27) (J).

(b) 8 U.S.C. Sec. 1101(a) (27) (J) offers interim relief from deportation to undocumented, unmarried immigrant youth under twenty-one years old, if a state court with jurisdiction over juveniles has made specific findings.

(c) The findings necessary for a youth to petition for classification under 8 U.S.C. Sec. 1101(a) (27) (J) include, among others, a finding that reunification with one or both parents is not viable due to abuse, neglect, abandonment, or a similar basis under state law, and a finding that it is not in the youth's best interest to be returned to the youth's country of origin.

(d) Misalignment between state and federal law continues to exist. Federal law allows a person under twenty-one years old, who otherwise meets the requirements for eligibility under 8 U.S.C. Sec. 1101(a) (27) (J), to file for relief. In Washington, however, vulnerable youth who are between eighteen and twenty-one years old have largely been unable to obtain the findings from the superior court necessary to seek classification under 8 U.S.C. Sec. 1101(a) (27) (J) and the relief that it was intended to afford them, solely because superior courts cannot take jurisdiction of these vulnerable youth under current law. This is true despite the fact that many vulnerable youth between eighteen and twenty-one years old face circumstances identical to those faced by their younger counterparts.

(e) Given the recent influx of vulnerable youth arriving to the United States, many of whom have been released to family members and other adults in Washington, and who have experienced parental abuse, neglect, or abandonment, it is necessary to provide an avenue for these vulnerable youth to petition the superior courts to appoint a guardian of the person, even if the youth is over eighteen years old. This is particularly necessary in light of the vulnerability of this class of youth, and their need for a custodial relationship with a responsible adult as they adjust to a new cultural context, language, and education system, and recover from the trauma of abuse, neglect, or abandonment. These custodial arrangements promote the long-term well-being and stability of vulnerable youth present in the United States who have experienced abuse, neglect, or abandonment by one or both parents.

(f) The legislature has an interest in combating human trafficking throughout Washington state. In 2003, Washington became the first state to enact a law making human trafficking a crime and has since continued its efforts to provide support services for victims of human trafficking while also raising awareness of human trafficking. Vulnerable youth who have been subject to parental abuse, neglect, or abandonment are particularly susceptible to becoming victims of human trafficking. By creating an avenue for a vulnerable youth guardianship for certain eligible individuals between eighteen and twenty-one years old, the legislature will provide such youth with

the possibility for additional support and protection that a guardian can offer, which will make these youth less likely to become targets for human traffickers. Guardians can support vulnerable youth by providing them stable housing and caring for their basic necessities, which may help alleviate many of the risk factors that make such youth prime targets for trafficking and exploitation.

(g) Vulnerable youth guardianships of the person may be necessary and appropriate for these individuals, even between eighteen and twenty-one years old, although a vulnerable youth for whom a guardian has been appointed retains the rights of an adult under Washington law.

(2) It is the intent of the legislature to give the juvenile division of superior courts jurisdiction to appoint a guardian for a consenting vulnerable youth between eighteen, up to the age of twenty-one who has been abandoned, neglected, or abused by one or both parents, or for whom the court determines that a guardian is otherwise necessary as one or both parents cannot adequately provide for the youth such that the youth risks physical or psychological harm if returned to the youth's home. The juvenile court will have jurisdiction to make the findings necessary for a vulnerable youth to petition for classification under 8 U.S.C. Sec. 1101(a)(27)(J). It is further the intent of the legislature to provide an avenue for a person between eighteen and twenty-one years old to have a guardian of the person appointed beyond eighteen years old if the youth so requests or consents to the appointment of a guardian as provided in RCW 13.90.030. [2017 c 279 § 2.]