



## **Annual Report to the Legislature**

# **Reducing the Time Children Remain in Care**

ESHB 1244 [C 564 L 09] Sec. 202(22)

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# Department of Social and Health Services

## Legislative Report on Reducing the Time Children Remain in Care

### Executive Summary

This report is prepared in compliance with Chapter 564, Laws of 2009 (ESHB 1244) Section 202, Subsection 22, which requires the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), Children's Administration (CA) to report on progress to safely reduce child length of stay (LOS). This report is submitted to meet that requirement.

The specific requirement set by the legislature is as follows:

*Section 202(22) The legislature intends for the department to reduce the time a child remains in the child welfare system. The department shall establish a measureable goal and report progress toward meeting that goal to the legislature by January 15 of each fiscal year on the 2009-2011 fiscal biennium. To the extent that actual caseloads exceed those assumed in this section, it is the intent of the legislature to address those issues in a manner similar to all other caseload programs.*

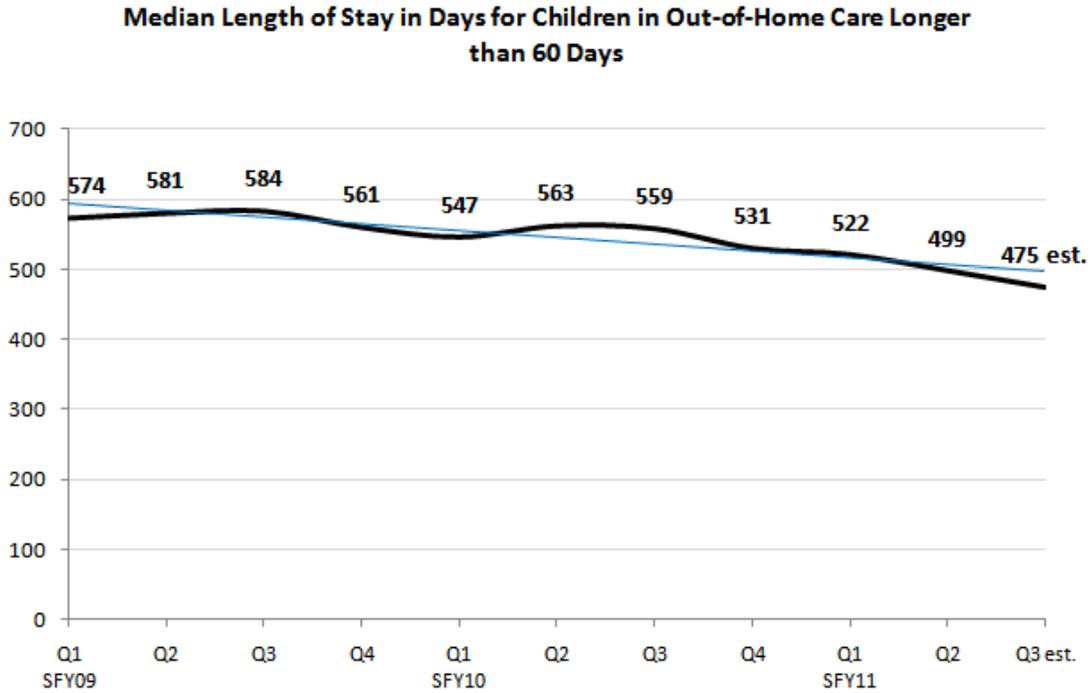
Children's Administration's core mission and first priority is the safety of children, both in their own homes and in out-of-home placement. When children cannot safely remain in their own homes Children's Administration is committed to safely reducing the time a child spends in out of home care and helping them achieve permanency sooner based on the best interest of each child.

Children's Administration tracks several measures which provide indicators on the administration's progress to safely reduce length of stay in out-of-home placement. CA tracks and reports the following measure related to length of stay:

- Median Length of Stay for Children in out-of-home care longer than 60 days: this measure provides the count of children in care longer than 60 days.
- Federal Children and Family Services Review (CFSR) permanency measures: counts children in care longer than 7 days; the CFSR measures includes 3 composite measures:
  - Timely reunification;
  - Timely adoptions;
  - Children in care for long periods of time.

## Washington's Length of Stay Measure

Strategies to reduce lengths of stay for children in long-term foster care are producing results carefully and steadily as we expect when measuring median lengths of stay.



Data Notes: Excludes children in out-of-home care less than 60 days, non-DCFS custody (tribal and other states), children over age 18 at start of the data period, and established guardianships. Values for all periods recalculated October 2010 after correction of tribal custody exclusion error, and after FAMILINK data cleanup to remove duplicate records. *Values for SFY 2010 Q3 are estimates; the allowed data entry period for this quarter was not completed by the date of data extraction.*

## Context and National Perspective

When compared with national data, Washington’s measures for timely permanency and lengths of stay for children and youth in foster care are in line with, and in many measures better than, those in other states.

### Timeliness and Permanency of Reunification

	<b>Federal FY 2010</b>
<b>Timeliness and Permanency of Reunification</b> (standard: 122.6 or higher)	State Score = 123.4
<b>National Ranking of State Composite Scores</b>	10 of 47
<b>Component A: Timeliness of reunification</b>	
Exits to reunification in less than 12 months [national median = 69.9%, 75 <sup>th</sup> percentile = 75.2%]	73.4%
Exits to reunification, median stay [national median = 6.5%, 25 <sup>th</sup> percentile = 5.4 months (lower score is preferable in this measure)]	Median = 2.4 months
Entry cohort reunification in <12 months [national median = 39.4%, 75 <sup>th</sup> percentile = 48.4%]	31.0%
<b>Component B: Permanency of reunification</b>	
Re-entries to foster care in less than 12 months [national median = 15.0%, 25 <sup>th</sup> percentile = 9.9% (lower score is preferable in this measure)]	15.6%

## Timeliness of Adoptions

	<b>Federal FY 2010</b>
<b>Timeliness of Adoption</b> (standard: 106.4 or higher)	State Score = 110.6
<b>National Ranking of State Composite Scores</b>	14 of 47
<b>Component A: Timeliness of adoption of children discharged from foster care</b>	
Exits to adoption in less than 24 months [national median = 26.8%, 75 <sup>th</sup> percentile = 36.6%]	23.6%
Exits to adoption, median length of stay [national median = 32.4 months, 25 <sup>th</sup> percentile = 27.3 months (lower score is preferable in this measure)]	Median = 32.7 months
<b>Component B: Progress toward adoption for children in foster care for 17 months or longer</b>	
Children in care 17+ months, adopted by the end of the year [national median = 20.2%, 75 <sup>th</sup> percentile = 22.7%]	24.8%
Children in care 17+ months achieving legal freedom within 6 months [national median = 8.8%, 75 <sup>th</sup> percentile = 10.9%]	12.1%
<b>Component C: Progress toward adoption of children who are legally free for adoption</b>	
Legally free children adopted in less than 12 months [national median = 45.8%, 75 <sup>th</sup> percentile = 53.7%]	61.7%

## Children in Care for Long Periods of Time

	<b>Federal FY 2010</b>
<b>Permanency for Children &amp; Youth in Foster Care for Long Periods of Time</b> (standard: 121.7 or higher)	State Score = 118.3
<b>National Ranking of State Composite Scores</b>	19 of 51
<b>Component A: Achieving permanency for Children in foster Care for Long Periods of time</b>	
Exits to permanency prior to 18 <sup>th</sup> birthday for children in care for 24+ months [national median 25.0%, 75 <sup>th</sup> percentile = 29.1%]	31.8%
Exits to permanency for children with TPR [national median 96.8%, 75 <sup>th</sup> percentile = 98.0%]	96.7%
<b>Component B: Growing up in foster care</b>	
Children emancipated who were in foster care for 3 years or more [national median 47.8%, 25 <sup>th</sup> percentile = 37.5% (lower score is preferable)]	53.8%

## Strategies to Reduce Length of Stay

The following strategies have been implemented within the Children's Administration to discuss and reduce length of stay for children:

- *Expedited adoptions* implemented in December 2010 with 916 children listed as legally free. A team of adoption experts deployed from headquarters to assist local adoption workers with completing adoption home studies, background checks, and adoption support applications. As of February 10, 2011, 214 children (23%) were adopted, in addition to 20 not on the list. The goal is to have the remaining 702 children adopted by July 2011.
- *Permanency Roundtables*, in partnership with Casey Family Programs, is expediting safe permanency for children with the greatest lengths of stay because of specific issues that impede permanency plan completion.
- *Tables of Ten* court improvement projects with judicial officers, Assistant Attorneys General (AAG), and the Office of Public Defense enhance systemic reform at the operational level and reinforce the court's role in this shared responsibility.
- *Family Team Decision-Making* meetings are expanding across the state as resources and funding allow improving practice and timely and safe permanency when children are initially placed and at times of potential placement disruption.
- Newly established *Guardianships* result in dismissal of dependencies and legal permanency for children, as a result of 2010 state legislation. Managers and social workers are working with relative caregivers to identify barriers to licensure, which is required to enter into the federal subsidized guardianship assistance program, which results in legal permanency for children.

## Challenges of Measuring Lengths of Stay in Child Welfare

While the length of stay for children in foster care is one of the conceptually simplest and most important indicators of the foster care experience, it is one of the most difficult to measure in any practical way:

- Each of the typical child welfare approaches to addressing this basic measurement problem suffers from various deficiencies.

The usual approach, measuring and reporting the median length of stay, still requires waiting until 50% of any given entry cohort has left care. This shortens the waiting time for reporting performance to less than two years following the end date of the entry cohort, but does not adequately capture the experience of children in long-term care. In addition, the waiting time of nearly two years is often still too long for detecting and addressing problems.

Measuring the length of stay for those newly exiting care ('exit cohort') on the surface drastically shortens the waiting time until performance can be reported, but this is just apparent – the children have still already left care and it is too late to affect their length of stay, and measuring length of stay only of those exiting care can drastically skew the apparent length of stay for all children. Variations on this theme, such as measuring the percentage exiting within a given time frame such as two years, just disguise the underlying deficiency.

Measures such as the Federal percentage of children reunified within 12 months of placement entry, or our proposed Core Metric 'Progress to Reunification/Permanency' which tracks the percentage reunified/achieving permanency within 9 months, have shorter performance-reporting waiting times than median length of stay and have the advantage of the accuracy of using entry cohorts. However, the disadvantage of this type of measure is the possibility, even more so than median LOS, that systemic barriers to permanency for children in longer-term care will not be adequately detected by measures that mark success at earlier times (exits at 12 or 9 months after entry). There is an increasing recognition by the child welfare research community that the foster care population is very heterogeneous with respect to systemic problems that may be encountered by different types of cases and children, and any 'one size fits all' measure of performance will provide only the crudest indicator of actual performance and systemic issues for all types.

- These issues are being discussed during national meetings with the American Public Human Services Association and the federal Administration for Children and Families regarding modifications to the federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) process for Round 3.

Because of the weaknesses identified in the federal measures, Children's Administration (CA) has adapted a number of the federal measures to more precisely measure current rather than past performance. CA also identified a number of process and outcome measures that are monitored at least quarterly. These measures give a sense of how the system is performing across the continuum, which is necessary to avoid the conflicts inherent with measures that are sometimes at cross purposes.

- When analyzing the lengths of stay, CA also looks at the percent of children re-entering placement and the re-abuse rate. Regions work continually to reduce lengths of stay while safely completing permanent plans for children.
- The current LOS measure was developed as an experimental "early warning" measure, but we do not yet know its effectiveness at detecting systematic barriers to permanency for children in longer-term care.
- CA plans to eventually replace this measure as the state of knowledge concerning measurement of length of stay improves.

CA continues to improve the use and functionality of FamLink and as the system matures, the data it produces is more reliable. This performance measure of *Median Length of Stay for Children in Out-of-Home Care Longer than 60 Days* will continue to be reported quarterly in GMAP.