



## CHILD WELFARE HOUSING ASSISTANCE PILOT PROGRAM OUTCOMES



Washington State Department of  
**CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES**

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**CONTENTS**

Executive Summary..... 1  
    Summary of DCYF Recommendations..... 1  
Background ..... 2  
Demographic Summary ..... 3  
Implementation Progress ..... 4  
Recommendations ..... 4  
Obstacles and Opportunities ..... 5  
Conclusion..... 5  
Appendix A: Stakeholder Group ..... 6

## Executive Summary

This report has been prepared in response to the 2019 Legislatures' SB 5718 (Saldana, Child Welfare Housing Assistance Program, <https://lawfilesexext.leg.wa.gov/biennium/2019-20/Pdf/Bills/Session%20Laws/Senate/5718-S2.SL.pdf?q=20220119144832>), for the Legislature and DCYF Oversight Board. The report must include racial, geographic, ethnic, and gender distribution of program support.

The Homecoming Program, offered by Reliable Enterprises under contract with the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) and authorized by SB 5718, creates a new state-funded resource to support families in reuniting with their dependent children in safe and stable housing. The program reaches out to reduce racial disparities for families and provides state-funded housing case management and support to leverage federal and other housing resources. Homecoming staff work with families, property owners, and partners to create housing opportunities in communities where they have not existed in the past for families who are DCYF clients.

Beginning July 1, 2020, DCYF was required to establish the program to provide housing vouchers, rental assistance, navigation, and other support services to eligible families in order to shorten the time that children remain in out-of-home care. The program was intended to be offered in both Eastern and Western Washington. Eligibility is limited to parent(s) with a DCYF dependent child whose primary remaining barrier to reunification is the lack of appropriate housing. Families may be referred to the program by a caseworker, attorney, guardian ad litem, child welfare parent mentor, Office of Public Defense (OPD) social services worker, or the court. DCYF was required to consult with a group of stakeholders to develop the design of the program.

## Summary of DCYF Recommendations

1. The Homecoming Program should serve reunifying families earlier and should serve other families to prevent removal or deeper Child Protective Services (CPS) involvement.
2. The Homecoming Program (Child Welfare Housing Assistance Program) should be offered statewide or continued as a pilot (due to COVID related impacts). Funding for this program should continue because of the capacity and leverage it has brought to DCYF housing efforts as a whole.

## Background

Senate Bill 5718 (Saldana, Child Welfare Housing Assistance Program, <https://lawfilesexternal.wa.gov/biennium/2019-20/Pdf/Bills/Session%20Laws/Senate/5718-S2.SL.pdf?q=20220119144832>) passed in 2019. The bill required that beginning July 1, 2020, DCYF was to establish the Child Welfare Housing Assistance Program, through a contract, to provide housing vouchers, rental assistance, navigation, and other support services to eligible families with a dependent child “whose primary remaining barrier to reunification is a lack of appropriate housing.” The purpose was to shorten the time that children remain in out-of-home care due to their parents’ lack of stable housing. The program was intended to be offered in Eastern and Western Washington.

Eligibility is limited to a parent with a child who is a DCYF dependent whose primary remaining barrier to reunification is the lack of appropriate housing. Families may be referred to the program by a caseworker, attorney, guardian ad litem, child welfare parent mentor, OPD social services worker, or the court. DCYF was required to consult with a group of stakeholders. The stakeholder group was intended to assist DCYF in the design of the program, including a list of topics (below).

The bill included a list of partners that DCYF would bring together as an advisory committee (Appendix A), including but not limited to, parent allies, parent attorneys and social workers managed by the OPD parent representation program, the Department of Commerce, housing experts, community-based organizations, advocates, and behavioral health providers. Between 2019 and 2020, the group met several times.

The bill delineated that the stakeholder group would assist the agency in designing the pilot program in areas including, but not limited to: a) equitable racial, geographic, ethnic, and gender distribution of program support; b) eligibility criteria; c) creating a definition of homeless for purposes of eligibility for the program; and d) options for program design that include outside entities operating the entire program or specific parts of the program.

The discussions with stakeholders identified that for the families intended to be supported by this program, a lack of housing prevented reunifications that should otherwise be happening, and that this pattern disproportionately affected Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC); Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual (LGBTQIA+), *with the “+” respectively recognizing identities not specifically named in the acronym*; and other families far from opportunity and justice.

On March 4, 2020, DCYF posted a request for proposals (RFP) to solicit bids from contractors in four counties: Lewis, Clallam, Yakima, and Pend Oreille. DCYF chose these counties based on need, including a lack of other family reunification programs in the counties (such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) Family Unification Program or Housing Choice Vouchers). In response to the RFP, DCYF received one application from Reliable Enterprises in Lewis County, and DCYF chose Reliable as the contractor at the beginning of May 2020. Due to COVID-19’s effect on agency contracting, DCYF suspended the contract in May 2020, and reinstated the contract later in the year so that Reliable could begin to serve families.

On Sept. 3, 2020, Reliable Enterprises’ contract took effect, and Reliable hired the program coordinator for Homecoming on Sept. 9, 2020. On Nov. 1, 2020, DCYF made a new staffing assignment and created an

Adolescent Program housing manager position to supervise implementation of the contract. Prior to that time, DCYF placed responsibility for the program with a DCYF staff person who held many other programs, and had a limited capacity to prepare the RFP and contract materials. The lack of staff capacity led to a delay in implementation.

Reliable was interested in providing services, even when it became clear that COVID-19 would have an effect on the program, because of their holistic approach to serving families (as evidenced by their other county, federal, and state-level contract work). Reliable has an ongoing desire to maximize families' strengths and connection with housing and other supports (employment; social, health, and behavioral health services; education; and community supports) to improve their sustainability as members of their communities. Reliable has been providing housing and housing services to families in Lewis County since 2008, and has seen the need for state-funded case management to support families' reunification with their children.

Local DCYF staff conducted early estimates of need, which initially included estimates of a combination of dependency/reunification cases, dependency cases where housing was not yet the "remaining" barrier, and shelter care cases. Based on this early estimate, Reliable forecasted that they could serve 25 families in Lewis County under the contract with housing vouchers, rental assistance, navigation and connections to housing, holistic case management, and other support services.

The first family served by the pilot program was housed in December 2020, and has successfully remained reunited with their child, and their dependency case has ended. Since the beginning of the contract, six families (including 15 family members) have been housed, and another 29 families have been provided case management (including orientation; housing application support; connections to employment services; connections to medical, behavioral, and personal support; accessing and transferring personal documents; creating partnerships, and other services that build trust). In addition, due to decisions, recommendations, and conversations between the DCYF Director of Adolescent Programs and Reliable Enterprises' management team, the Homecoming Program is now being provided beyond Lewis County and throughout DCYF's Region 6. Reliable staff use resources under the program to assist the families in locating housing, and work with rental property owners to create housing opportunities in communities where none are currently available.

## Demographic Summary

Six families received housing, for a total of 15 individuals (eight adults and seven children) served. Of the six families served with housing, one had one or more members of their household who identified as a person of color. Of the eight adults, six identify as female and two as male, and the gender distribution was nearly evenly split between self-identified female and male for children.

Of the 34 adults served with case management, representing 29 families (which included 90 children), the majority, nearly 75%, identified themselves through the application process as White. Among the other nine participants, two identified themselves as American Indian or Alaska Native, one identified themselves as Black or African American, and five chose not to respond to the question. We did not collect information on Hispanic/Latino heritage, making that metric currently unavailable. DCYF is working with

Reliable to improve data collection in this regard going forward. The gender distribution for adults was approximately 2/3 female and 1/3 male.

## Implementation Progress

As it has been developed and disseminated, the program has achieved several successes, including:

- Referrals are coming in from across the range of referral sources, including the Mason County Family Recovery Court.
- The program has expanded from Lewis County throughout Region 6, and is preparing to enter Region 2.
- Families who have taken the voluntary tenant education course, Rent Well, report that the class has made them more confident in their ability to find better housing in the future. In a survey conducted by Reliable staff in September 2021, one parent said, “It gave me more knowledge of what was required from landlords and tenants.”
- Relationships built with Housing Authorities have yielded Housing Choice Vouchers that had previously not been available to DCYF clients.

## Recommendations

DCYF recommends that:

1. **The Homecoming Program should serve reunifying families earlier, and should serve other families to prevent removal or deeper CPS involvement.** The program described in the bill is targeted to parents where housing is the “primary remaining barrier” to reunification. DCYF recommends serving families earlier in the reunification process, because families need housing before taking the other steps necessary to stabilize and reunify with their dependent children. Although policy requires that homelessness not be the reason that children are placed in dependency, DCYF regional offices and other stakeholders have expressed that -- because access to stable and affordable housing *can prevent* removal or deeper CPS involvement -- the Homecoming program should be expanded to serve parents who are at risk of having children placed in dependency.
2. **The Homecoming Program (Child Welfare Housing Assistance Program) should be offered statewide or, at a minimum, continued as a pilot (due to COVID-related impacts).** Through the launch of the pilot, DCYF offices outside Region 6 have expressed interest in the program, and have confirmed that a lack of housing affects family reunification, a lack of available housing is significant statewide, and racial and other disparities are present affect systemic disproportionality in all communities. If resources cannot be found at this time to extend the reach of the program, the pilot should be continued for another two years in order to fulfill the Legislature’s original intent in the face of COVID-19. According to data from the National Center for Housing and Child Welfare (NCHCW),<sup>1</sup> Washington currently spends more than \$25 million per year to place children in out-of-home placement. The Center estimates that Washington can save nearly \$13 million by providing housing and housing support services to eligible families statewide. Although the program’s impact has been both later and smaller than hoped for, the number of

<sup>1</sup> From email communication with Ruth Ann White at NCHCW, dated July 16, 2021.

referrals, amount of case management and navigation assistance provided are positive enough to warrant continuation of the pilot at this time. Funding for this program should also be continued because of the capacity and leverage it has brought to DCYF housing efforts as a whole. Funding provided in the budget designated for SB 5718 has enabled DCYF to bring a new level of service to housing for youth and families, and better cross-agency coordination, particularly with Department of Commerce OHY and the Health Care Authority.

## **Obstacles and Opportunities**

The disruptive effect of COVID 19, an underlying lack of housing stock, a slow start getting referrals, and a lack of positive experiences of both property owners and DCYF client families with housing case management all caused delays in implementation of the Homecoming program. In response, DCYF effectively ramped up referral strategies; built partnerships with property owners and housing authorities in counties throughout Region 6; and has demonstrated the benefits of effective housing cases management to build trust with both families and property owners.

## **Conclusion**

5718 is strongly aligned with DCYF's strategic priority to safely reduce the number of children and youth in out-of-home care. DCYF believes this program serves a vital function in helping families reunify more quickly and providing families with the support they need to be successful. While the implementation was delayed and there have been a number of learning opportunities along the way for DCYF and Reliable, DCYF is excited by the early results of the program and desires to see it continue and serve more families.

## Appendix A: Stakeholder Group

Throughout the process of designing, deploying, and adjusting the Homecoming program, the stakeholder group's thoughts and experiences have been pivotal. Invited members of the stakeholder group include:

- Alise Morrissey with the Children's Home Society
- Alison Isinger with the Seattle-King County Coalition on Homelessness
- Annette Rodriguez with Yakima Neighborhood Health Services
- Ashley Albert with Children's Home Society
- Cecily Ferguson with the Anchor Communities Initiative in Spokane
- Charles Smith with the Washington State Office of Public Defense
- Coco Chang with Senator Saldana's office
- Jacob Dannunzio with the Washington State Office of Public Defense
- Jason Bragg with the Parents' Representation Program at the Office of Public Defense
- Senator June Robinson
- Kate Armstrong with Senator Robinson's office
- Katara Jordan with Building Changes
- Kathy Kinard with the Washington State Department of Commerce
- Kishan Scipio, community member, also with King County
- Laurie Lippold with Partners for Our Children
- Liza Burell with Building Changes
- Michael Heard with the Washington State Office of Public Defense
- Michelle Thomas with Washington Low Income Housing Association
- Nicole Sadow-Hasenberg with Partners for Our Children
- Senator Rebecca Saldana
- Ruth Ann White with the National Center for Housing and Child Welfare
- Shrounda Sellivanoff with the Parents' Representation Program at the Office of Public Defense
- Terry Pottmeyer with Friends of Youth
- Sherrie Flores, Jess Lewis, Carol Mitchell, Genevieve Stokes, Julie Watts, and Mary Sprute at DCYF