

CAREGIVER PROTECTION PLAN



Fostering Change



Introduction to the Caregiver Protection Plan

For years now, many have agreed that the current foster care system in Washington is not working as well as it could. Children entering foster care are essentially voiceless as they are shuffled between biological parents, relatives, foster families, or until they age out of the system entirely. Changing the system requires much thought and consideration for all parties, ultimately providing for the best safety and stability of all dependent children, while striving for reunification. The issues currently impacting the success of our foster care system are as follows:

- Declining number of foster homes
- Damaged relationships between foster families, biological families, and the Department
- Timelines for permanency that continue to exceed Federal guidelines
- Often inadequate advocacy and representation for dependent children
- High volume of caseloads for Social Workers and the Court
- Inefficient spending due to current caseload management

As a result of the aforementioned issues, those involved in the case are often unable to operate in the best interest of the child. This current working environment creates frustration for the foster families who are tasked with the responsibilities of caring for the dependent child, but often are not treated as respected and valued members of the child's team. Taking action to address these inadequacies requires legislative action. Through the attached Caregiver Protection Plan, most notably through the inclusion of De Facto Kinship, all of these issues are addressed with the following intended outcomes:

- Increased quality, quantity and longevity of foster homes
- Improved working relationships between foster families, biological families, and the Department
- Increased likelihood that Federal timeliness for permanency are met
- Reduced volume of caseloads which improves the quality of support/service to all parties
- Reduced agency costs through more effective caseload management
- Continued protection of the biological parent's rights during the reunification process

It is our mission to link arms with those in our state who seek to protect children and improve this broken system. As better policies and laws are implemented that support and value foster parents, we commit to being part of the solution by launching the "Plus One Project", where we will ask each current foster family to recruit one new foster family, to quickly solve the shortage of foster homes in Washington state and give dependent children the best possible care.

-The Fostering Change Team

Caregiver Protection Plan

PURPOSE: In order to provide dependent children with the best possible support and stability, caregivers must be given basic protections and courtesies. This initiative emphasizes the respect that caregivers deserve as a vital member of the child's welfare team. As the people who provide the care and support for dependent children on a day to day basis, caregivers should be treated with respect to encourage retention of quality foster parents and to unify all people involved in a dependency case.

FOSTER PARENTS

1. Foster Parent Rights and Responsibilities Manual

- a. Available in hardcopy and online, Includes:
- b. Foster Parent Rights and Responsibilities with corresponding WACS
- c. Reporting Requirements Chart.
- d. Dependency Court Timeframe Guidelines
- e. Current local department contact information and updated phone directory.
- f. Grievance protocol (Calling up the Chain of Command).

2. Building a Unified Team

- a. To improve foster parent support, social workers will be educated on basic foster parent training. (ie, Caregiver Core Training)
- b. To promote a better working relationship and understanding of each other's unique roles, "Team Building Training" will be required of foster parents within the first 6 months of becoming licensed and social workers within the first 6 months of employment. (ie "Partners Make Better Decisions: Caregivers and Social Workers Working Together")
 - i. Certificate of completion and signed social contract.
- c. Child Team Meetings
 - i. Quarterly meetings to discuss improvements and/or concerns involving the dependent child with all members of the child's team, including bio parents, foster parents, social workers, teachers, doctors, therapists, CASA/GAL.
 - ii. Reviewing and determining services for the needs of the dependent child.

3. Placement Disclosures

- a. Department must disclose all known history of a child's harmful behaviors, safety concerns and/or communicable diseases in writing before placement is accepted. Any undisclosed behaviors would automatically void the placement agreement and the foster parent will not be charged with neglect of the child in their care if they determine they cannot continue as placement for the child.
- b. Foster parent will not be held liable for any issues that arise due to undisclosed behaviors or information known by the department prior to placement.

4. Allegations

- a. Founded DLR violations will hereby be called ‘infractions’ and will no longer be considered founded allegations.
- b. DLR infractions should be seen as foster parent training opportunities and dealt with through extra training and/or compliance agreements given to families when they are out of licensing regulations.
- c. DLR investigations will be completed within 30 days.
- d. After 3 infractions within 3 years, foster license is under review for non-compliance to DLR standards and can be suspended or revoked.
- e. CPS allegation protocol will remain unchanged.
- f. Foster parents will be notified of their rights to appeal and will be educated of the process and steps to take to obtain records and documents from the department that are necessary for the appeal.
- g. Social Worker must provide written documentation when addressing foster parent non-compliance or other foster parent issues. Social worker must also show what has been done to educate or support the foster parent to resolve the issues prior to submitting a formal complaint
- h. Important Definitions
 - i. DLR Infractions involving the violation of licensing requirements do NOT pertain to abuse and neglect of a child.
(ie: Expired fire extinguisher or CPR mask)
 - ii. CPS Allegations involving abuse and neglect of a child will remain top priority and the investigation process will remain unchanged.

5. De Facto Kin Status

De Facto Kin is hereby defined as: A person who is the current or recent caregiver of a child, acting as the parent on a day-to-day basis, fulfilling the child’s physical, emotional and psychological needs of care and affection for a minimum of six months, based on the child’s success in the foster home, attachment to the foster parents and the relationship that has been established.

- a. Foster parents can apply for ‘De Facto Kin’ status after the child has been in the foster home for six months.
- b. De Facto Kin status is available to foster parents who desire to be a committed, stable and long-term placement during the time a child is in care. This would allow the foster parent to be more actively involved in decision-making and advocacy for the child, as well as eliminating unnecessary moves that cause more trauma.
- c. De Facto Kin status allows foster parents to be considered an option for permanency, alongside other relatives, as a non-related extended family member.
- d. The dependency case will remain active in Juvenile Court.

- e. When applying for De Facto Kin status, foster parents must submit 3 letters of reference from non-relative sources along with the De Facto Kin application to the court (ie, doctor, counselor, teacher). If there are areas of concern, the social worker can request further exploration such as a psychological evaluation or a bonding & attachment assessment.
- f. De Facto Kin will have the same rights and standing in court as relatives.
- g. De Facto kin status allows more communication between foster parents and bio parents, when deemed safe and at the discretion of the foster parent and biological parent.
- h. If the permanency plan changes to adoption, the process would be the same as current foster/adopt policies.

*Summary: De Facto kin status does not interfere with bio parent's or relative's rights. It provides the dependant child with a committed, long-term home if a suitable relative has not been found within the first six months. (see "Relative/Suitable Other" below)
Establishing De Facto Kinship will help maintain federal timelines by promptly establishing a stable placement plan for the remainder of the dependency case if reunification is not possible.*

**All other foster parent rights will remain the same unless addressed above.*

RELATIVES/ SUITABLE OTHERS

1. The Department will have six months to identify family and obtain a cleared background check from any committed family member. This ensures that biological relatives are given first priority for placement and eliminates unnecessary usage of a foster home when a suitable relative is available.
 - a. Biological parents will be required to disclose the names of family members immediately after dependency is established to allow the department to locate and screen relatives.
 - b. Family Finding Unit: DCFS staff with the sole purpose of locating relatives.
2. Any relative home study application or ICPC submitted before the 6 month timeframe will ensure preferential placement to the suitable relative over de facto kin.
3. Once a committed family member has been notified of the child in care, they will be encouraged to establish a relationship with the child via visits, skype, phone calls, etc.
4. After six months, the Department is no longer obligated to actively search for relatives, although relatives may still come forward after six months to be considered.
5. Relative Caregivers will be educated on the differences between being a licensed foster family vs. an unlicensed relative caregiver, specifically regarding licensing requirements and financial assistance available.