



# Washington's Parents Representation Program Helping Children in Child Welfare System Reach Permanency

## KEY MESSAGES

- The Parents Representation Program is helpful in moving children from the child welfare system to permanent homes.
- The Parents Representation Program cuts the time it takes for children to reach permanency:\*

Reunifications occur  
**1 MONTH** sooner\*\*

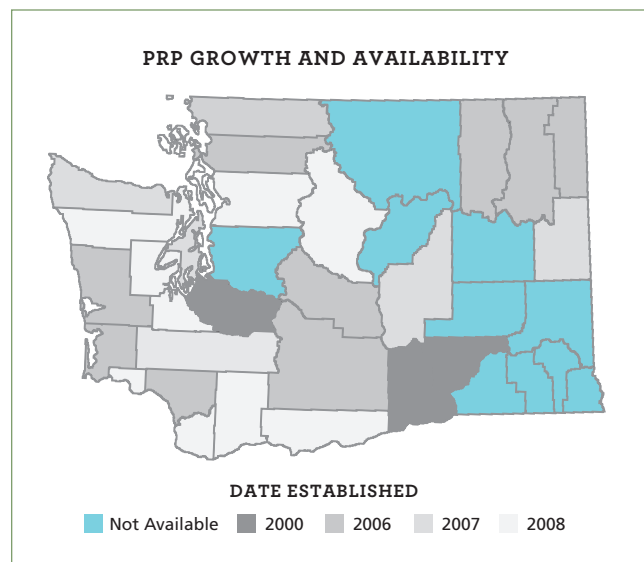
Adoptions and Guardianships  
occur **1 YEAR** sooner\*\*

\*Based on a projection of statewide implementation on a cohort of children entering care in 2001 \*\*Approximations

## Summary

Legal representation in juvenile court has been recognized by most states as an essential protection for parents when children have been removed from their custody. A 1999 study called into question whether parents in Washington were receiving adequate legal representation in processes that have significant consequences for parents and children.<sup>1</sup> The Parents Representation Program (PRP) was developed by the Washington State Office of Public Defense (OPD) and the Washington State Legislature to enhance the quality of defense representation for parents in dependency and termination hearings. The program aims to reduce the number of continuances requested by attorneys, limit caseloads (no more than 80 cases per attorney) and supports their work by ensuring attorneys have reasonable time to prepare cases and work with clients. The program provides social workers, expert resources, periodic trainings, and oversight through OPD. Piloted initially in three counties in 2000, the program has now expanded to 25 counties across the state. See Map.

<sup>1</sup> Washington State Office of Public Defense (1999). *Costs of Defense and Children's Representation in Dependency and Termination Cases*. Olympia, WA; Author.



In 2010, Partners for Our Children at the University of Washington conducted a study on the impact of PRP, looking at the program's influence on the speed with which children are reunified, adopted or enter guardianships.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> To date, the PRP is the only program of parental representation in juvenile dependency proceedings known by the authors to have been the subject of evaluation research.

## The Study

The study followed 12,104 children who entered care for the first time in 2004 to 2007 through the end of 2008 to see whether they achieved reunification, adoption or guardianship. To assess the impact of PRP, the study compared counties with PRP to counties without PRP. The research methodology also accounted for other causes of variation, including the child's sex, age at entry, race, year of entry, reasons for removal, presence of siblings in the system, the type of placement, number of moves, and the number of children entering foster care in each county each year.<sup>3</sup>

## The Results

The availability of adequate parental legal representation speeds reunification with parents, and for those children who do not reunify, hastens permanency through adoption and guardianship. In counties where PRP is present, the rate at which children are reunified is 11% higher, the rate at which children are adopted is 83% higher, and the rate at which child children enter guardianships is 102% higher.<sup>4</sup> Although PRP's impact is greater on adoption and guardianship than on reunification, the decrease in time to reunification affects more children because reunification is the most common outcome for children. Of children achieving permanency during the study period, 68% reunified, 26% were adopted, and 6% exited to guardianship.

## The Implications

- Washington should extend PRP to all counties.
- PRP is helpful in moving children from the child welfare system to permanent homes.
- PRP cuts the time it takes for children to reach permanency: Reunifications occur 1 month sooner and adoptions and guardianships occur 1 year sooner.
- Policymakers interested in improving the prospects of legal permanency for children who become dependents of juvenile courts should consider PRP or a similar program.
- Jurisdictions that want to address poor parental representation and potentially shorten the time that children are in foster care should consider a program like PRP.
- PRP is a fairly straightforward intervention that can be readily replicated in other jurisdictions.
- The findings support the arguments of advocates for adequate parental representation in the dependency court process.
- The findings call into question concerns that parents' attorneys delay moving from a case goal of family reunification to adoption or guardianship.

*Although PRP's impact is greater on adoption and guardianship than on reunification, more children are impacted by the speed up to reunification because it is the most common outcome.*

<sup>3</sup> Per thousand, measured in each county, each year

<sup>4</sup> All else being equal, the exit rate to reunification is 1.11 times faster when a child is living in a county where the PRP is in operation than when a child lives in a county where PRP is in not in operation. Marginally significant at  $p < .05$  ( $p = .051$ ). The exit rate to adoption is 1.83 times faster,  $p < .001$ . The exit rate to guardianship is 2.04 times faster,  $p < .001$

*This information is taken from "Evaluation of the Impact of Enhanced Parental Legal Representation on the Timing of Permanency Outcomes for Children in Foster Care," by Mark E. Courtney and Jennifer L. Hook, Partners for Our Children, University of Washington.*

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