

## Positive Outcomes of the Parents Representation Pilot Program

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**Introduction:** In 2000, at the direction of the State Legislature, The Washington State Office of Public Defense instituted a pilot program to provide enhanced legal representation to parents in dependency and termination cases in the Pierce and Benton/Franklin Juvenile Courts. The program was designed to redress resource inequities between the parties in these cases. The mandates for this program are to 1) provide better representation to parents, 2) decrease the number of court delays and 3) increase attorney compensation. As a result of meeting these mandates, the expected outcomes are an increased number of family reunifications and fewer continuances of hearings.

Since 2001, three different evaluations by three different organizations have examined the program<sup>1</sup>. Each of the evaluations showed positive results associated with the program.

**Key Findings:** While the evaluations examined many aspects of the program, two key findings emerged:

- **An increased rate of family reunifications:** *all three evaluations* found an increasing number of family reunifications after the start of the program.
  - The evaluation by the Northwest Institute for Children and Families
    - In Benton/Franklin counties the number of reunifications went from 12 before the program to 24 during the program while the number of cases rose only slightly, from 295 to 312. This represents an 88% increase in the reunification rate.
    - In Pierce County, in a review of selected case files, the rate of reunifications went from 54% to 60%, an increase of 11%.
  - The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges evaluation found that the reunification rate went from 36.8% before the program to 56.4% during the program, an increase of 53%.
  - The Northwest Crime and Social Research evaluation found that the rate of reunifications went up an average of 60% after the first quarter of the program, while the caseload rose only 20%.
- **A decrease in continuance rates:** The overall program's continuance rate was 12.6% for all hearings, compared to a rate of 31% statewide. Thus, continuance rate in the program counties was 59% lower than the statewide rate.

**Conclusions:** The Parent's Representation Program has been evaluated on three different occasions by three different entities. These evaluations used different research methods, different samples and covered different time periods. In spite of these differences, all three showed personal benefits to clients of program attorneys as well as the potential for significant societal benefits, in the form of reduced costs for out-of-home placements. The findings regarding reunifications in program counties are particularly noteworthy, since statewide, during the same time period, reunification rates were falling<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Details of the three evaluations can be found in the Technical Notes.

<sup>2</sup> Miller 2004a, 2004b.

## Technical Notes: Three Evaluations of the Parents Representation Program

|                                      | Evaluation Authors  |   |  |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|--|
|                                      | <b>Office of Public Defense, Northwest Crime and Social Research, Inc., 2002.</b> | <b>National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, Oetjen 2003.</b> | <b>Northwest Institute for Children &amp; Families (University of Washington), Harper et al. 2005</b>  |
| <b>Data Sources</b>                  | Monthly program attorney records  | Court Case Files  | 1) Monthly program attorney documentation forms, 2) interviews with key personnel in the program counties and 3) selected case files.  |
| <b>Units of Analysis</b>             | Hearings & Cases  | Cases   | Hearings & Cases   |
| <b>Comparisons</b>                   | 1 <sup>st</sup> quarter of the program period compared to succeeding quarters,    | Pre-program period with program period                                    | 1) Early program period with later program period, 2) pre-program with program period and 3) Juvenile courts in the program counties with the juvenile courts in the state as a whole. |
| <b>Sample Composition &amp; Size</b> | Monthly attorney records (n=13,000)   | Random sample of case files (n=144)                                       | 1) Case files (n=447), 2) monthly attorney records (n=25,000), 3) Interviews w/key personnel (n=28)  |
| <b>Counties</b>                      | Benton/Franklin & Pierce analyzed separately                                      | Cases from both program courts analyzed together.                         | Benton/Franklin & Pierce analyzed separately.  |

### Sources

- Harper, CJ; Brennan, K; Szolnoki, J. 2005. Dependency and Termination Parents' Representation Program Evaluation Report, 2005. Seattle, WA: Northwest Institute for Children and Families, University of Washington School of Social Work.
- Miller, M. 2004a. How Do Court Continuances Influence the Time Children Spend in Foster Care? Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.
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- Oetjen, JA. 2003. Improving Parents' Representation in Dependency Cases: A Washington State Pilot Program Evaluation. Reno, NV: National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.
- Washington State Office of Public Defense. 2002. Dependency and Termination Parents' Representation Pilot: Evaluation. Olympia, WA: Office of Public Defense.