



## **Report to the Legislature**

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

Chapter 564, Laws of 2009, Section 202(22)  
(ESHB 1244)

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## 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. 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.*

The department has developed a permanency plan to accomplish a two percent reduction in the time that children remain in care. The two percent reduction in fiscal year 2010 aligns with the budget authorized by the legislature for the 2009-2011 biennium.

For placements open in fiscal year 2008, the average length of stay was 777 days. For placements open in fiscal year 2009, the average length of stay was 717 days. This 60 day difference indicates a downward trend in the length of stay by 7.73 percent.

The following report describes the efforts to safely reduce the time children remain in care, including specific plans to complete permanent plans for children. Permanency plans to reduce child length of stay focus on:

- Safely reunifying children more quickly
- Safely accelerating adoptions for legally free children
- Safely completing other permanent plans more quickly, including third party custody arrangements and changes to parenting plans

## Reducing Child Length of Stay in Out of Home Care

In fiscal year 2009, the Children's Administration initiated a concerted effort to safely reduce the length of stay for children in out of home care. These efforts have continued in fiscal year 2010 and been expanded in order to improve outcomes for children and families as well as meet the expectations outlined in the 2009-2011 biennial budget.

For placements open in fiscal year 2008, the average length of stay was 777 days. For placements open in fiscal year 2009, the average length of stay was 717 days. This 60 day or 7.73 percent difference indicates a downward trend in the length of stay between fiscal year 2008 and fiscal year 2009. Average length of stay data for fiscal year 2010 cannot yet be calculated.

Reductions in the fiscal year 2010 budget for foster care require that there be a two percent reduction of children in paid foster care. This translates to:

- A reduction in the total number of children and youth served in paid foster care by approximately 220 children during fiscal year 2010

OR

- A reduction in the average number of paid foster care days per person by about 4 days during fiscal year 2010

Early data on fiscal year 2010 indicates that the number of children in care is lower. On July 1, 2009, 9,590 children were in out of home care. On December 1, 2009, the number of children in out of home care was 9,048. However, these numbers are not an indication of the length of time children remain in care.

Children's Administration continues to implement general strategies and several specific strategies to impact children's time in care. The general strategies include providing permanency planning training to staff throughout the state to increase the use of concurrent planning by social workers. The second general strategy is to work collaboratively with the Assistant Attorneys General around the state to review children who have been in care more than one year. Through these reviews, steps can be identified to complete permanent plans for children.

The specific strategies being implemented address the following topics:

- Safely reunifying children more quickly
- Accelerating adoptions for legally free children
- Completing other permanent plans (e.g., third party custody, relative guardianship)

The Children's Administration is planning to meet with leadership in the Attorney General's Office to discuss establishing a consistent statewide staffing process that is held jointly with the Assistant Attorneys General as children approach 12 months in care where decisions are made about whether it is safe to reunify children or whether a Termination of Parental Rights petition should be filed. This staffing process is intended to speed the process of moving toward completion of permanent plans for children.

Children's Administration is currently establishing various forms of staffings and consultation to improve completion of permanent plans. For example:

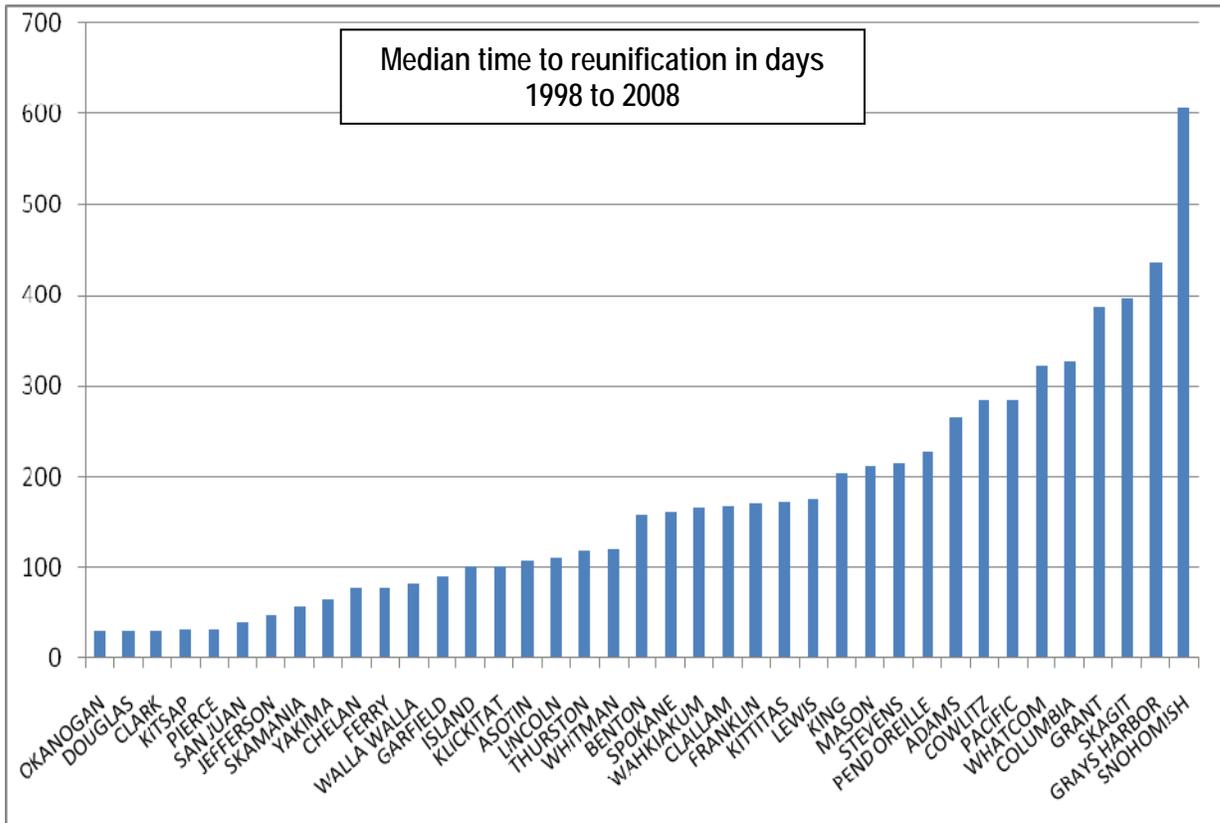
- Region 2 is working with Casey Family Programs to implement a consultation process which originated in Georgia. The consultation reviews cases that have been open over one year to identify additional possibilities for completing permanent plans. Children's Administration is in discussion with Casey Family Programs to implement the same approach in up to four additional locations.
- In Region 3, FTDM staffings have been held every 90 days for children in BRS to identify opportunities to move children to completed permanent plans, including reunifications.
- Lastly in some regions, case consultations which are part of the Solution Based Casework implementation are focusing on children who have been in care over 12 months. In these consultations, discussions focus on reviewing case plans to determine what must be completed to either reunify children with their parents or to complete another permanent plan for the child.

Children's Administration is monitoring closely the number of children in care, expenditures on foster care and other placement settings, and progress on the permanency plans throughout the state in order to determine whether progress toward the two percent reduction is being made.

### **Safely Reunify Children More Quickly**

Children's Administration has been working over the past year to improve the timeliness of safe reunification of children with their parents. With the assistance of Partners for Our Children (POC), analysis was completed of the median time to reunification in each county of the state. The data outlines the time to reunification for all first entries into care between the years of 1998 and 2008.

**By County Analysis of Median Time to Reunification<sup>1</sup>**



This information was provided as part of initial meetings around the state which involved local Children’s Administration staff, POC staff, judges and commissioners, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), parents’ attorneys, and Assistant Attorneys General. Following the initial meetings, Children’s Administration and its local partners have continued to meet and discuss ways to safely reunify children more quickly. These plans include more regular reviews of case plans within the Children’s Administration, as well as more timely court hearings to examine whether it is safe and appropriate to return children to their homes.

**Accelerate Adoptions for Legally Free Children**

Efforts to accelerate adoptions began in fiscal year 2009. The number of completed adoptions exceeded 1,700 in fiscal year 2009. This was the largest number of children adopted in one year in state history. The efforts which began in fiscal year 2009 will continue in fiscal year 2010. In the first quarter of fiscal year 2010, the number of completed adoptions was slightly above the first quarter in fiscal year 2009. It is still too early in the fiscal year to determine if Children’s Administration will be able to match the number of completed adoptions in fiscal year 2009.

<sup>1</sup> Source: Partners for Our Children Analysis of CAMIS Download - 2009

In addition to tracking the number of completed adoptions, Children's Administration has been monitoring the number of legally free children who are still in care 12 months after Termination of Parental Rights has been completed. In November 2008, 960 legally free children with a plan of adoption were still in care 12 months after becoming legally free. In July 2009, 873 legally free children with a plan of adoption were still in care 12 months after becoming legally free. In September 2009, the number had declined to 817 children.

Children's Administration is contracting for adoption home studies as directed by 2SHB 2106. It is anticipated that the additional capacity to complete home studies which is provided through contracts will increase the likelihood of meeting the expectations of the legislature as laid out in the fiscal year 2010 budget.

### **Complete Other Permanent Plans**

Children's Administration has also initiated efforts to increase the completion of other permanent plans when safe reunification or adoption is not possible. These permanent plans include reunification by completion of third party custody agreements and establishing relative guardianships.

To assist with completion of permanent plans, Children's Administration has increased its relative search activities. These search activities include upfront efforts to identify relatives who are willing to care for children as an out of home care provider as well as ongoing relative search activities that may result in identifying a relative that is willing to provide a permanent home to children for whom safe reunification and adoption are not possible.

To finalize a permanent plan, once a relative is identified, families must have access to attorneys who can assist them with the required legal proceedings. Children's Administration has been working with local community partners to identify ways to improve the process and assist families in navigating the court process. This has included contracting for mediation services and navigation services that facilitate the completion of alternate permanent plans.

### **Summary**

The early numbers in fiscal year 2010 indicate that:

- The number of children in care is lower
- Adoption completions are similar to fiscal year 2009

It is too early in the fiscal year to determine if Children's Administration will accomplish the goal of reducing child length of stay by two percent. Children's Administration

regions are reporting regularly on progress toward reducing child length of stay. These reports allow for regular problem solving and planning to ensure that children's time in care is being reduced.

An additional report will be made regarding Children's Administration progress on reducing the time children remain in care on January 15, 2011.