

# A SEPARATE CHILDREN'S DEPARTMENT IN WASHINGTON STATE

## BRIEF

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Washington State

### SUMMARY:

The proposal of a separate children's department in Washington State has been introduced legislatively and studied extensively. The state's Joint Task Force on Administration and Delivery of Services to Children and Families issued a majority report in 2007 recommending a separate children's department as the best way to serve the citizens of Washington State. A separate children's department has the potential to promote greater accountability, heighten the visibility of children's issues, reduce barriers to improving practice, and advance children's priorities through an independent budget and direct access to the state executive.

### WHAT IS THE RATIONALE BEHIND THE CURRENT STRUCTURE?

Organizational structure of state agencies focused on child welfare services exist in an array of configurations. Many, like Washington State, are part of a larger umbrella comparable to the state's Department of Social and Health Services. Limited research exists regarding the ideal organizational structure of child welfare agencies as they relate to outcomes for child welfare-involved families. Nonetheless, given the common challenges and barriers – especially related to mental health – of many children and families referred to state agencies (Glisson, 1996; Klee & Halfon, 1987; Melton & Flood, 1994), the consolidation of social and human service agencies is often cited as a logical structure for effectively serving children and families.

### DOES THE CO-LOCATION OF SOCIAL AND HEALTH SERVICES IMPROVE OUTCOMES?

This is not necessarily the case. A quasi-experimental, longitudinal study exploring interorganizational service coordination with 250 children in 24 counties in Tennessee indicates such coordination had no significant effect on outcomes (as measured by children's improved psychosocial function) and a negative impact on service quality. At the same time, the study found organizational climate (as measured by low conflict, cooperation, role clarity, and personalization) is the primary predictor of service outcomes and a significant predictor of service quality (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998). As such, strategies to improve organizational climate rather than ensuring interorganizational service coordination – through consolidation of agencies or otherwise – should be prioritized.

### IS A SEPARATE CHILDREN'S DEPARTMENT A NEW IDEA IN WASHINGTON STATE?

There have been a number of attempts at moving toward a separate children's department in Washington State. Notable

legislation on this issue include SB 6127 (1988), SB 5765 (1989), SSB 6789 (1990), and HB 3061 (2008). Though their timelines and mandates differ, all of these legislative strategies have specifically called for the creation of a separate department focused on children and their families.

Further, this issue has been reviewed extensively in Washington State through the Joint Task Force on Administration and Delivery of Services to Children and Families. This taskforce was established by ESSB 5872 (2005) and charged with determining the most appropriate and effective administrative structure for delivery of social and health services to the children and families in the state and to make recommendations to the legislature and the governor.

The majority report of the task force issued in 2007 recommended that a children's agency separate from DSHS would best serve the citizens of Washington State. Specifically, the task force determined a separate department would have the means to (Joint task force on administration and delivery of services to children and families, 2007):

- Create a culture shift that is more family and consumer oriented and empowers its staff to make decisions leading to positive outcomes;
- Have a leader oversee this reform with a direct cabinet level seat in the Governor's office;
- Enhance preventive services as an integral part of the agency;
- Allow for greater flexibility for communities; and
- Allow for budget and personnel autonomy.

### IS A SEPARATE CHILDREN'S DEPARTMENT BECOMING A NATIONAL TREND?

An increasing number of jurisdictions have recently created separate children's departments or are in the process of

doing so. These include Indiana, New Jersey, New York City, Tennessee, Georgia, and Wisconsin. While difficult to draw causation, initial reports from child welfare advocates in these states indicate improvements in child welfare outcomes correlating with these transitions.

Despite initial skepticism that the creation of a separate children's department in New Jersey was simply a "reshuffling of the cards" without meaningfully addressing systemic issues, Cecilia Zalkind, executive director of Advocates for Children of New Jersey, has attested that a separate children's department in New Jersey has correlated with a more independent department that can enact change more easily than in its previous structure. She also indicated a greater level of authority and visibility both in budget conversations and in relation to access to the state executive (phone conversation, November 8, 2015).

Sandra Killet, the executive director of the Child Welfare Organizing Project in New York City, has emphasized the separate budget resulting from a separate children's department creates the ability for child welfare investments to be tied more closely to child welfare outcomes (phone conversation, January 20, 2016).

Similar trends were reported in Tennessee following the state's transition to a separate department. Additionally, Tennessee has experienced notable improvement in outcomes for children involved with the juvenile justice system since the transition. Linda O'Neal, the executive director of the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth, has specifically cited a dramatic drop in the number of delinquent children in secure placements since the creation of a separate children's department (phone conversation, January 6, 2016; email communication, January 19, 2016).

In all of these instances it was emphasized a separate department must be coupled with effective leadership and a strong focus on prevention and family preservation as a means to create a meaningful shift in outcomes for children and their families.

## WHAT CAN WASHINGTON STATE EXPECT FROM THE CREATION OF A SEPARATE CHILDREN'S DEPARTMENT?

The creation of a separate children's department in Washington State has the potential to create positive change with respect to improving outcomes for children and families in several key areas:

- **Greater accountability:** A smaller, separate department could more easily identify, establish, and promote priorities related to outcomes for child welfare-involved families.
- **Greater visibility of children's issues:** A separate department could elevate the conversation regarding issues affecting children and families in Washington State; it would be less likely for children's priorities to be lost within a larger bureaucracy.
- **Fewer barriers to improving practice:** A separate department could be more adaptable and flexible and have the ability to be more responsive to the needs of families and the community.
- **A separate budget:** A separate department would allow for priorities relating to children and families to be

advanced directly to the governor and reduce the prevalence of children's issues competing with other populations within DSHS for funding.

- **Direct voice to the governor:** A separate department would elevate issues related to child safety, permanency, and well-being to the governor's office with a cabinet-level seat in the state executive's administration.

Moving forward, it is essential to have comprehensive information related to the costs of the current makeup of the Department of Social and Human Services. Cost estimates for a separate department are contingent on the determination of components to be included in the proposed structure.

## CONCLUSION

A separate children's department in Washington State was recommended by the majority report of the 2007 Joint Task Force on Administration and Delivery to Services of Children and Families after extensive review. Separate children's departments have been implemented in other jurisdictions that have seen positive trends in child welfare outcomes and the visibility of children's issues following the transition. The creation of a separate children's department in Washington State is rooted in ensuring a clear focus on children's issues and improving outcomes and accountability for children and their families.

## ENDNOTES

1. Glisson, C. (1996.) Judicial and service decisions for children entering state custody: The limited role of mental health. *Social Service Review*, 70, 257-281.
2. Glisson, C. & Hemmelgarn, A. (1998.) The effects of organizational climate and interorganizational coordination on the quality and outcomes of children's service systems. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 22(5), 401-421.
3. Joint task force on administration and delivery of services to children and families. (2007). Washington State Legislature, Archived committees. Retrieved from <http://leg.wa.gov/JointCommittees/Archive/ADSCF/Pages/default.aspx>
4. Klee, L. & Halfon, N. (1987.) Mental health care for foster children in California. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 11, 63-74.
5. Melton, G. & Flood, M. (1994.) Research policy and child maltreatment: Developing the scientific foundation for effective protection of children. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 18, 1-28.