

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Work in progress: Audit description

Improving Services to Help Prevent Placement in Unfamiliar Foster Homes

The Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF) oversees the protection of children from abuse and neglect. When it receives an allegation of child abuse or neglect, the preferred option is to support the family with preservation services to improve the home environment. However, if the home is too dangerous, the next option is to place the child with family members or friends who have a good relationship with the child (kinship caregivers). Research shows children placed in familiar settings experience more positive outcomes. Further, familiar placements free up foster homes for children who do not have this option.

Despite the benefits of preservation services and kinship care, DCYF is not always able to provide these services. Some services are not available locally, so families are unable to access them. Even if DCYF locates a possible kinship caregiver, the placement can still face financial hurdles unless the caregiver becomes licensed as a foster home. However, the foster care licensing process can be burdensome, and potential kinship caregivers often choose not to become licensed.

The foster care system in Washington is overburdened, lacking sufficient homes to care for children who are removed from their families. As a result, the agency has taken extreme measures, including lodging children in hotels or even in an office until it locates a stable placement. Furthermore, negative media coverage and current litigation have placed the agency under additional pressure. Improving preservation services and placing children in more familiar homes may not solve the problem but could ease the burden on the foster care system.

Preliminary scope and objectives

This audit will examine how effectively the Department of Children, Youth & Families supports children who are at risk of entering foster care by providing services that allow them to remain in familiar settings. The audit seeks to answer the following questions:

- What steps could DCYF take to improve its Family Preservation and Prevention Services and help more children remain safe and in their homes?
- What steps could DCYF take to improve its Kinship Care Services and Supports program to place more children in a familiar home instead of entering the full foster-care system?

Timing

We plan to publish a report detailing our findings in the summer of 2022.



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