

Improving the Well-Being of Washington State's Children, Youth and Families

*The report of the Washington State Blue Ribbon
Commission on the Delivery of Services to Children and
Families*

November 8, 2016

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Executive Summary

The Blue Ribbon Commission

Governor Jay Inslee established the Washington State Blue Ribbon Commission on the Delivery of Services to Children and Families and charged it with recommending a structure for a new state department focused solely on improving services and outcomes for children, youth and families.

The way government is organized signals what its priorities are. A decade ago, our state created the nation's first cabinet-level Department of Early Learning to intentionally focus our collective attention on our youngest children and their families. Since then, Washington has become a national leader in our efforts to close the opportunity gap and increase kindergarten readiness with the highest quality programs. We now need to build on these successes and go a step further, integrating and aligning all of our best practices to serve children, youth and families.

Brain science tells us that laying a strong foundation, early in life, critically impacts healthy development. The science also tells us that addressing trauma, especially at critical transition points in the lives of youth, helps ensure successful transition into adulthood. To truly give all children the great start in school and life they deserve, our state needs a comprehensive agency exclusively dedicated to the social, emotional and physical well-being of children, youth and families — an agency that prioritizes early learning, prevention and early intervention at critical points along the age continuum from birth through adolescence.

Several other states, under both Democratic and Republican administrations, have successfully implemented departments dedicated to serving children and families. These departments have improved the visibility of children's issues, increased authority and accountability, enabled policy changes and system improvements, and created a

stronger focus on serving children, youth and families in both the executive and legislative branches.

Even the most resilient children and youth, especially those exposed to challenging circumstances early in life, often have adverse experiences and trauma that impair their ability to succeed in school and beyond. Advancements in research and science have helped us better understand indicators of risk, how they impact healthy development, and the critical importance of stable, nurturing relationships to the healthy development of children, particularly in their early years. We know that we can either pay now or pay a lot more later if we don't address these early traumas.

Our state has an opportunity not only to create a new agency, but also to design new approaches for systems that were created decades ago — systems that can more effectively improve the well-being of Washington's children, youth and families.

Commission Findings and Conclusions

After reviewing research, hearing from stakeholders and studying data regarding how children, youth and families are faring in our state today, the commission concluded:

- ❖ ***State services are not currently organized in a way that achieves the best outcomes for children, youth and families.*** There should be a single department whose mission is centered on child safety, early learning, and the social, emotional and physical well-being of children, youth and families — supporting and strengthening families before crises occur.
- ❖ ***We should build on current strengths and successes of the Department of Early Learning (DEL).*** Our state's youngest children and families have already benefitted considerably from this state-level focus. We must expand this work and continue to strive for and prioritize early learning, prevention and early intervention.
- ❖ ***Parents and families who are facing challenges must be offered needed and appropriate services earlier to improve the healthy development of children and youth, protect them from harm and disrupt multigenerational trauma.***

- ❖ *We should use this opportunity to improve the effectiveness of how and when services are delivered, with a much greater focus on prevention and recognition of the importance of caregiving to healthy brain development.*

What we know about the importance of stable, nurturing relationships for children — as well as the impact of trauma — must be incorporated into the practice model for early learning, child welfare and juvenile justice, including the courts.

- ❖ *We should strengthen the collective impact of all services provided by the state to children, youth and families, no matter which agency is the lead for providing them, by making sure they are science-based, have aligned outcomes, share real-time data and create a more cohesive continuum of care.*

This will help the state make maximum use of its resources by allocating funding and services in ways that are consistently aligned with the best practices for serving children, youth and families. For those involved with any state system, there should be more seamless connections whenever possible to other needed services, for instance the use of Medicaid-funded services, that will help to minimize additional system involvement or harm.

- ❖ *We should prioritize those children and youth most at risk of neglect, physical harm, sexual abuse and other adverse factors most often linked to low rates of kindergarten readiness, dropping out of school, substance abuse, incarceration, homelessness and other negative outcomes later in life.*

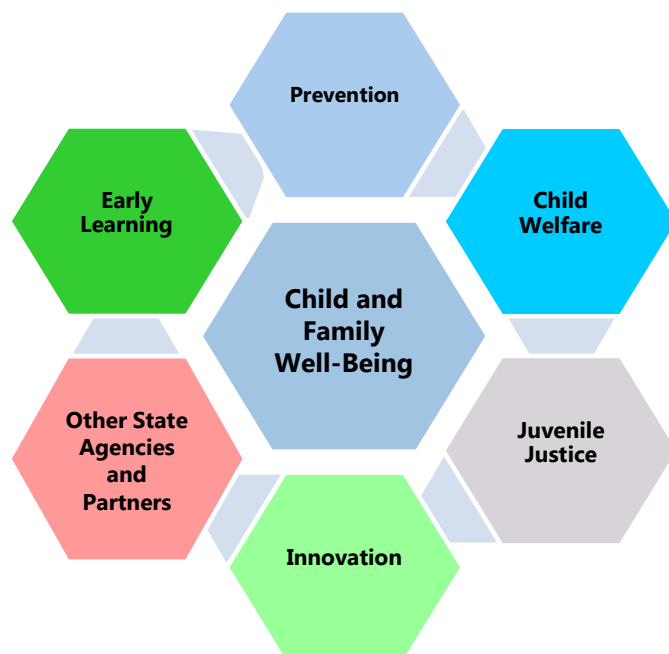
- ❖ *We should integrate the Children's Administration (CA) with DEL to better ensure that children get access to help and services early in life, when it can give them the foundation they need and put them on a path to healthy development and success in school.*

- ❖ *We should also integrate Juvenile Rehabilitation (JR) and the Office of Juvenile Justice into the new department to better address all youth who are at one time or another in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.*

- ❖ ***We should ensure focused attention on adolescents, with this new agency having primary responsibility for helping the state achieve better outcomes for youth in this age cohort.*** Adolescent brain development is a critical period and an opportunity to change a youth's trajectory into adulthood. Older children and youth also are an important focus for any holistic approach to supporting the well-being of children.
- ❖ ***We should ensure that the programs and services of this department are tightly aligned or integrated with essential services such as economic supports that address poverty, and access to behavioral health services.***
- ❖ ***We should strengthen the linkages to K–12 schools to ensure that children and youth who are struggling or disengaged from school are identified early and that resources in the new department, schools and communities are mobilized and coordinated to support students' continued progress toward graduation.*** Access to needed behavioral health services must be streamlined and integrated to ensure timely provision of help to keep children and youth on a trajectory toward academic success.

A New Department, Focused Squarely on Children, Youth and Families

Understanding of brain science reflects the importance of stronger connections and a continuum-of-care approach among early learning and the other early childhood services provided by DEL, the child welfare system, and juvenile justice and other services for adolescents. The new agency, the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF), would use the infrastructure of DEL. It would encompass the DSHS programs currently operated by CA, JR and the Office of Juvenile Justice.



A Culture of Data, Innovation and Addressing Systemic Problems

The new agency would help create a data-focused environment in which all partners are clear that the state can only achieve this vision if there is shared, real-time data that is accessible to everyone interacting with the family, child or youth at the time of the interaction, to know what they need and which services would be effective.

While others in the agency are focused on the day-to-day task of serving children and families, the new agency would have an Office of Innovation and Alignment to lead this effort and other ongoing system reform work. This office would focus on continuous improvement, including advancements in research; alignment and measuring of outcomes, including the use of evidence-based and research-based practices; data sharing across state agencies and key statewide private partners; development of a children, youth and families budget in partnership with the Office of Financial Management; quality assurance; and evaluation. It also would lead partnerships with the community, research and teaching institutions, the philanthropic community and nonprofit partners. Each year, in collaboration with key stakeholders, the Office of Innovation and Alignment would produce an annual work plan for priorities for ongoing policy, practice and system reform, as well as tracking and reporting out on the performance of its reforms accomplished to date.

Additional considerations include the following:

- ❖ ***Disparities impacting children, youth and families across systems must be addressed as a fundamental underpinning of the new model.*** Providing equitable access to services and supports must be a priority.
- ❖ ***A robust data and technology capability is fundamental to improving outcomes for children, youth and families.*** The new department's technology needs to align with Washington's longstanding commitment to the use of data to understand who is being served, for what purpose and to what end.
- ❖ ***Implementation of this new model, focusing on addressing risk factors and intervening early, can reduce costs.*** These cost savings should be reinvested to address service gaps across the state with culturally appropriate evidence-based and research-based interventions.