



Report to the Washington State Legislature

## Parent-Child Visitation



Washington State Department of  
**CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES**



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## Executive Summary

This report consists of an analysis of the strategies and associated outcomes related to efforts to improve the visitation system for children in out-of-home care and was prepared in accordance with the budget proviso in Substitute Senate Bill 5883, §202 (14) (2017), which provided funding to:

... develop, implement, and expand strategies to improve the capacity, reliability, and effectiveness of contracted visitation services for children in temporary out-of-home care and their parents and siblings. Strategies may include, but are not limited to, increasing mileage reimbursement for providers, offering transportation-only contract options, and mechanisms to reduce the level of parent-child supervision when doing so is in the best interest of the child.

The Department of Children, Youth, and Families' (DCYF) mission is to protect children and strengthen families so they flourish. Child welfare caseworkers work routinely with parents to safely maintain children in their home and prevent out-of-home placement. However, in order to protect children and youth, child welfare caseworkers can request that courts order the removal of a child or youth from their parents' care if safety threats are present. A judge or commissioner decides issues such as where the child should live, what services are needed to support family reunification and how often the child should have visits with parent(s) and siblings while in out-of-home care.

Each month, approximately 7,500 of Washington's children are in out-of-home care and are required to have court-ordered visits with their parent(s) and/or siblings. The courts, often based on caseworker recommendations, decide the level of supervision required to keep children safe during visits. DCYF caseworkers then develop a Visit Plan. Visitation occurs through a variety of mechanisms. The parent's natural supports can act as an approved adult for monitored or supervised visits before considering paid providers or DCYF caseworkers. If the Visit Plan requires supervision that cannot be facilitated by foster parents, relatives, a supportive other or caseworkers, DCYF staff can refer the Visit Plan to a contracted visitation provider.

Regular, frequent and progressive visitation is an integral part of the reunification process after a child is removed from their home. Visitation is intended to maintain, strengthen and/or redefine the parent-child relationship during what is a difficult time for everyone involved. Frequent and consistent visitation is linked to positive outcomes, including improved child well-being and faster reunification when it is in the best interest of the child.<sup>1</sup>

Recognizing the benefits of maintaining and strengthening the parent-child relationship, court-ordered visitation has significantly increased over the last 20 years. FamLink Visit Plans<sup>2</sup> show an average of two visits ordered per week for each child, averaging 2.3 hours per visit. This amounts to more than 1.7 million hours of visitation per year, with more than 790,000 hours provided by contracted visitation providers. The remaining 970,000 hours are provided or facilitated by relatives, caseworkers and foster parents or do not require supervision. Providing for the large and growing demand for visits creates challenges. Under the former Children's Administration (CA), there were no corresponding budget increases to match the continued growth of visitation, thus CA (and now DCYF) struggles with growing demands on resources.

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<sup>1</sup> Partners for our Children. *Visitation in the Welfare System (PDF)*. 2016.

<sup>2</sup> FamLink is Washington State's child welfare information system.

Current DCYF visitation policy (as inherited from CA) incorporates some best practices, but experts and DCYF recognize that Washington State's current parent-child visitation (PCV) model and practice needs improvement in order to better serve families. DCYF staff believe the current PCV model can be enhanced to better engage families and create an environment that is more supportive of family reunification. Further, current PCV reimbursement rates create challenges for staff retention and recruitment among contracted visitation providers, leading in turn to insufficient contracted capacity and reliability to meet court-ordered visitation requirements. PCV referrals are frequently not accepted by a contracted visitation provider in regions with higher costs of living. This inhibits DCYF's ability to comply with PCV court orders. More importantly, failure to provide visitation and inconsistent visitation personnel can negatively affect families.

DCYF is committed to further assessing and implementing improved PCV strategies that support children's well-being and safe family reunification. This work focuses on three major areas: capacity, quality and accountability. These improvement areas are based on national best practices; feedback from parents, staff and providers; and data from ongoing pilots.

### Capacity

Available data suggest court-ordered visitation services are under-provided in Washington's higher cost-of-living regions, where approximately one-third of children needing visitation services are placed. In order to increase supervised visitation capacity, DCYF plans to renegotiate PCV contracts in the calendar year 2020. Revised contract terms and potentially enhanced reimbursement rates will allow contracted visitation providers to attract and retain quality personnel. In contract revisions, the contracted providers will need to provide all needed visitation within their area of service. In parallel, DCYF staff are working with judicial partners to reduce the level of required supervision during visits based on the child's safety and best interest.

### Quality

Research suggests that integrating visitation with a supportive parenting education program or model may help reduce re-traumatization for children, support parents and increase family reunification.<sup>3</sup> Prior to merging with DCYF, the former CA initiated two different supportive parenting practice model pilots: *Strive* and *Supported Visits*. Both pilots seek to increase the rate of completed visits, decrease re-traumatization for children, support parents during and after the visit and ultimately increase the likelihood of reunification. DCYF's Office of Innovation, Accountability, and Alignment (OIAA) will make recommendations to the DCYF Secretary and agency leadership on expanded use as results from both pilots become available.

Additionally, DCYF will have additional opportunity to support improved quality of PCV broadly as visitation contracts move through the DCYF outcomes-oriented, performance-based contracting (PBC) process.

### Accountability

While the current electronic Visit Plan in FamLink increased DCYF's ability to track the number of court-ordered visits and the required visitation supervision level, it does not provide information about how

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<sup>3</sup> Barth, Richard P., et al. "Parent-Training Programs in Child Welfare Services: Planning for a More Evidence-Based Approach to Serving Biological Parents." *Research on Social Work Practice*, vol. 15, no. 5, Sept. 2005, pp. 353–371, doi:10.1177/1049731505276321.

well the agency is complying with associated outcomes. In order to do that, DCYF needs to record contracted visits in a more effective and integrated way, as well as address the workload issues that will arise from a different approach.

In December 2018, DCYF began the acquisition of an electronic database system to capture and report PCV data. This system, originally called Oliver and now named Sprout, will serve as a tool to support DCYF's commitment to collect and use data to inform and evaluate reforms, leveraging and aligning existing services with desired child outcomes.

### Conclusion

While DCYF recognizes the many efforts of contracted providers as well as agency caseworkers, there is still much work to be done to further understand PCV issues and change visitation outcomes. DCYF and OIAA, in collaboration with contracted providers, will work to further research and implement visitation strategies that support a child's well-being and promote healthy family connections.

## Introduction

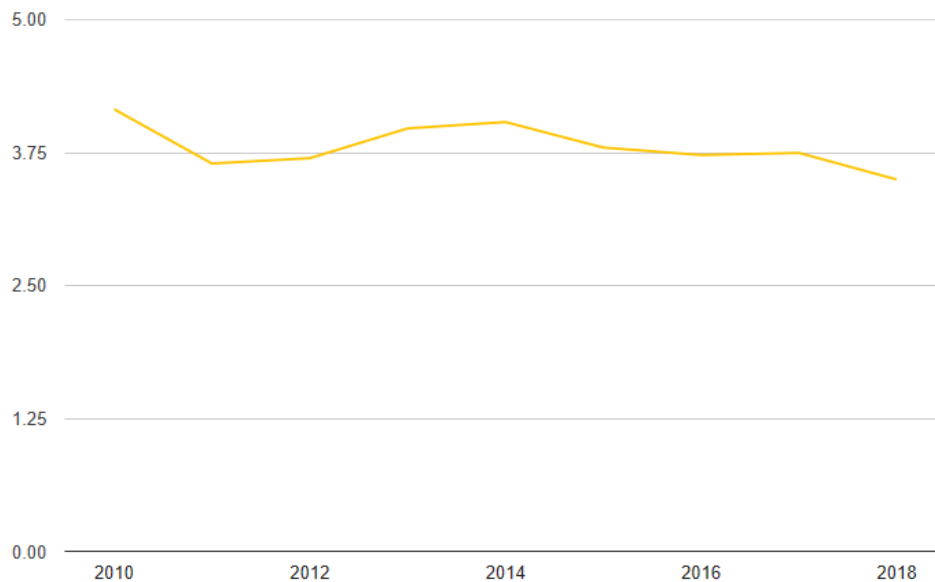
This report consists of an analysis of the strategies and associated outcomes related to efforts to improve the visitation system for children in out-of-home care and was prepared in accordance with the budget proviso in Substitute Senate Bill 5883, §202 (14) (2017), which provided funding to:

... develop, implement, and expand strategies to improve the capacity, reliability, and effectiveness of contracted visitation services for children in temporary out-of-home care and their parents and siblings. Strategies may include, but are not limited to, increasing mileage reimbursement for providers, offering transportation-only contract options, and mechanisms to reduce the level of parent-child supervision when doing so is in the best interest of the child.

The Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) first became operational in July 2018, bringing together the former Department of Early Learning and the Department of Social and Health Services' Children's Administration (CA). On July 1, 2019, the Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration, Office of Juvenile Justice and Working Connections Child Care also transitioned from DSHS to become part of DCYF. DCYF is now the lead agency for state-funded services that support children and families to build resilience and health and to improve educational outcomes.

DCYF's mission is to protect children and strengthen families so they flourish. Part of that mission includes working to ensure children are safe. Child Protective Services (CPS) routinely works with parents to safely care for their children and prevent the need for out-of-home placement. The rate of children entering out-of-home care per 1,000 children in the general population decreased from 4.16 in 2010 to 3.50 in 2018.

Figure 1: Entering Out-of-Home Care (Rate) During a Year<sup>4</sup>

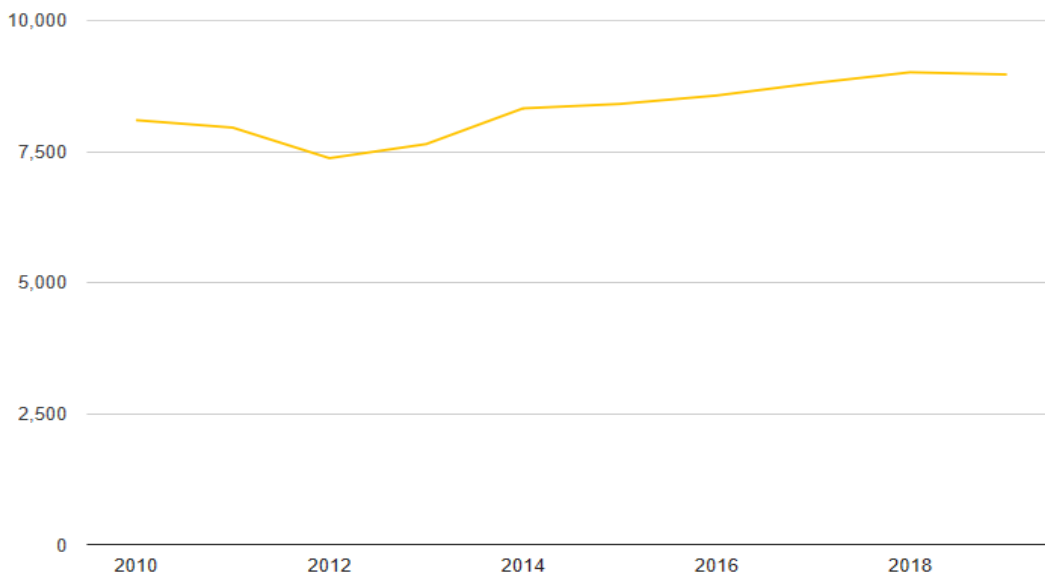


<sup>4</sup> Partners for Our Children Data Portal Team. (2019). [Graph representation of Washington State child welfare data 3/26/2019]. [Entering Out-of-Home Care \(Rate\)](#).

DCYF CPS caseworkers can go to court to request removal of a child from their parents’ care if necessary to protect the child from imminent risk of harm. A judge or commissioner then decides on issues such as where the child should be placed, what services are needed to support family reunification and how often the child should have visits with parent(s) and siblings.

While the rate of children entering out-of-home care has decreased, Washington’s total population has increased from an estimated 6,724,540 in 2010 to 7,535,591 in 2018.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the total number of children in out-of-home placement at a point in time has steadily increased since 2012, from 7,379 children on January 1, 2012, to 8,975 children on January 1, 2019 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Children in Out-of-Home Care (Count) On the First Day of the Year<sup>6</sup>



Maintaining and supporting strong relationships between children, their parent(s) and their siblings is a core value of DCYF. Regular, frequent and progressive visitation is an integral part of the reunification process after a child is removed from their home. Visitation serves to maintain, strengthen and/or redefine the parent-child relationship during what is a difficult and often a traumatic time for everyone involved. Frequent and consistent PCV is linked to positive outcomes, including improved child well-being and faster reunification when it is in the best interest of the child.<sup>7</sup>

In 2004, PCV became a statutory right for families in Washington’s child welfare system:

Visitation is the right of the family, including the child and the parent, in cases in which visitation is in the best interest of the child. Early, consistent and frequent visitation is crucial for maintaining parent-child relationships and making it possible for parents and children to safely reunify. The department shall encourage the maximum parent and child and sibling contact possible when it is in the best interest of the child, including regular visitation and participation by the parents in the care of the child while the child is in placement. (RCW 13.34.136)

<sup>5</sup> United States Census Bureau. Washington population estimates July 1, 2018, persons under 18 years.

<sup>6</sup> Partners for Our Children Data Portal Team. (2019). [Graph representation of Washington state child welfare data 3/26/2019]. [Entering Out-of-Home Care \(Count\)](#).

<sup>7</sup> Partners for our Children. [Visitation in the Welfare System \(PDF\)](#). 2016

## PARENT-CHILD VISITATION

Each month, approximately 7,500 of Washington’s children in out-of-home care are legally required to visit with their parent(s). The courts, often based on caseworker recommendations, decide the frequency and length of visits. The courts also decide how much supervision a parent needs during a parent-child visit to ensure the child’s safety.

- Supervised visits require an approved adult to maintain line-of-sight and sound supervision and to intervene if needed.
- Monitored visits require the parent to be the primary caregiver during the visit, while an approved adult is available to periodically observe and intervene if needed. The parent must demonstrate the willingness and ability to manage any safety threats and safely care for the child during the visit.
- Unsupervised visits require the parent to be the primary caregiver and able to demonstrate the willingness and ability to safely care for the child for the duration of the visit and protect the child from any safety threats.

The child welfare caseworker then develops a Visit Plan in FamLink to document and support the court’s order. Visitation can occur through a variety of mechanisms. The parent’s natural supports can act as an approved adult for monitored or supervised visits before considering paid providers or caseworkers. If the plan requires a level of supervision that cannot be facilitated by foster parents, relatives, a supportive other or caseworkers, DCYF staff can refer the PCV plan to a contracted visitation provider.

In 2017, FamLink Visit Plans showed an average of two visits required per week, which amounts to more than 764,000 contracted visits needed each year.

Table A: Calendar Year 2017 – Parent-Child Visitation	
Average number of children in care each month requiring parent-child visitation	7,498
Average number of visits per child planned each week	1.96
Average number of visits per child planned each month	8.5
Average number of hours of each planned visit	2.31
Average number of hours of planned visitation per child each month	19.6
Estimated total number of hours of visitation planned each month	147,108
Estimated total number of hours of visitation planned each year	1,765,293
Estimated total number of hours of visitation to be facilitated by foster parents, relatives or caseworkers each year	970,935
Estimated total number of planned visits provided by contracted service providers each year	764,196
Total number of hours of visitation to be facilitated by contracted service providers each year	794,358

As noted in the Office of Family and Children Ombuds (OFCO) 2018 annual report,<sup>8</sup> “the separation and reunification of families and agency conduct and services were by far the most frequently identified issues in complaints.”

<sup>8</sup> Dowd, Patrick. *2018 Annual Report (PDF)*. Office of the Family and Children’s Ombuds.



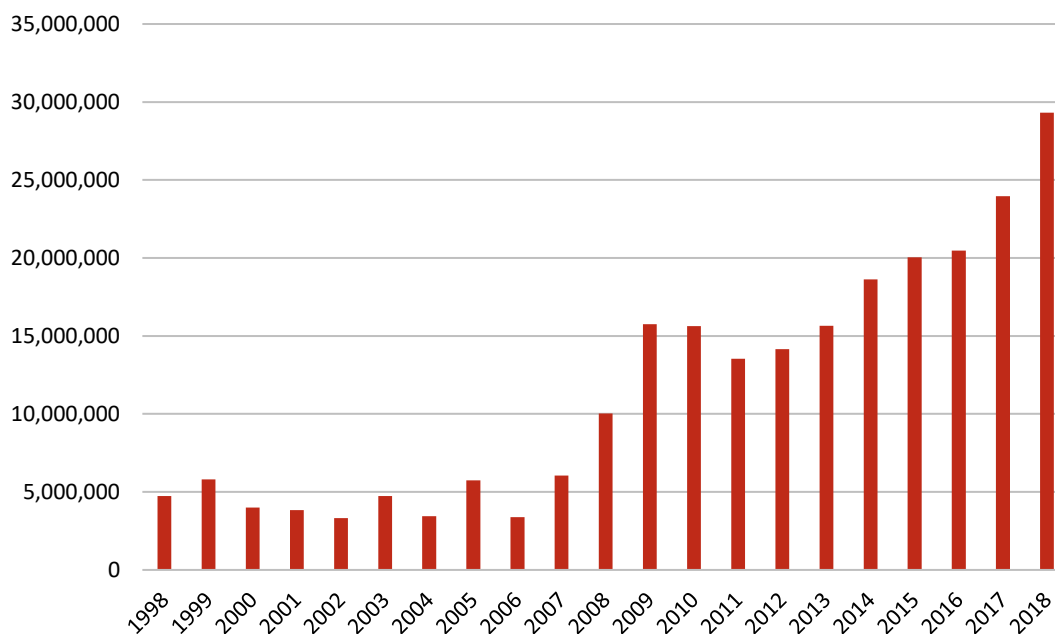
Experts and DCYF staff agree that the PCV statewide model and practice needs improvement in order to better serve families. DCYF has committed to further investigate PCV strategies that support child well-being and safe family reunification. This work includes three major areas: capacity, quality and accountability.

## Parent-Child Visitation Challenge #1: Capacity

The level of supervision, frequency and duration of parent-child visitation is determined by the court. Judges and commissioners have become increasingly aware of the benefits of parent-child visitation and have subsequently mandated visits more frequently and for longer durations in child welfare cases. However, without concrete data about the cost-benefit of supervised versus unsupervised visits, judges tend to lean more heavily on ordering supervised visits, which, in addition to the increase in the total number of visits, has driven up costs significantly.

While the number of children in out-of-home care has remained about the same over the last 10 years, total annual PCV spending increased from \$3,092,080 in 1998 to \$29,959,409<sup>9</sup> in 2018. The former CA struggled with the growing demands on visitation resources. Figure 3 below illustrates this increase, adjusted for inflation.

Figure 3: Total Parent-Child Visitation Spending by Year (2018 dollars)



OFCO received 116 complaints from September 2017 through August 2018 alleging the agency was not providing appropriate visitation, as well as 13 complaints that the agency was not ensuring appropriate contact between siblings in out-of-home care.<sup>10</sup> During the 2017-2018 reporting year, OFCO made three adverse findings related to parent-child and/or sibling visits not occurring. According to OFCO, “visits

<sup>9</sup> Children’s Administration fiscal data.

<sup>10</sup> Dowd, Patrick. *2018 Annual Report (PDF)*. Office of the Family and Children’s Ombuds.

## PARENT-CHILD VISITATION

were not occurring, at least in part, because the caseworker was unable to locate a contracted visit provider to supervise the visits.”

The established contracted visitation rate for both supervised and monitored visits is \$24.49 per hour.<sup>11</sup> This is a fully-inclusive rate that is intended to covers salaries, overhead and any benefits the provider gives to employees or subcontractors. Yet, DCYF’s visitation expenditures are the lowest in regions where the cost of living is highest. In King County, for example, the average visitation expenditure per child per year is \$1,748. Inversely, the average expenditure in DCYF Service Region 1 is \$5,816, where the average cost of living index is lower.

**Table B: CY2018 Parent-Child Visitation Expenditures, By Region<sup>12</sup>**

Region	Total 2018 Spending	% of Total Spending	Total # of Children Needing a Visit*	% of Total Children Needing a Visit	Average Spending Per Child Per Year**
<b>Region 1</b>	\$7,660,322	25.6%	1,317	18.3%	\$5,816
<b>Region 2</b>	\$3,922,738	13.1%	616	8.5%	\$6,368
<b>Region 3</b>	\$2,869,175	9.6%	1,008	14.0%	\$2,846
<b>Region 4</b>	\$2,393,142	8.0%	1,369	19.0%	\$1,748
<b>Region 5</b>	\$5,796,927	19.3%	1,360	18.8%	\$4,262
<b>Region 6</b>	\$7,265,906	24.3%	1,537	21.3%	\$4,727
<b>Other</b>	\$51,200	0.2%	8	0.1%	\$6,400
<b>Total Statewide</b>	\$29,959,409	100%	7,215	100.0%	\$4,152

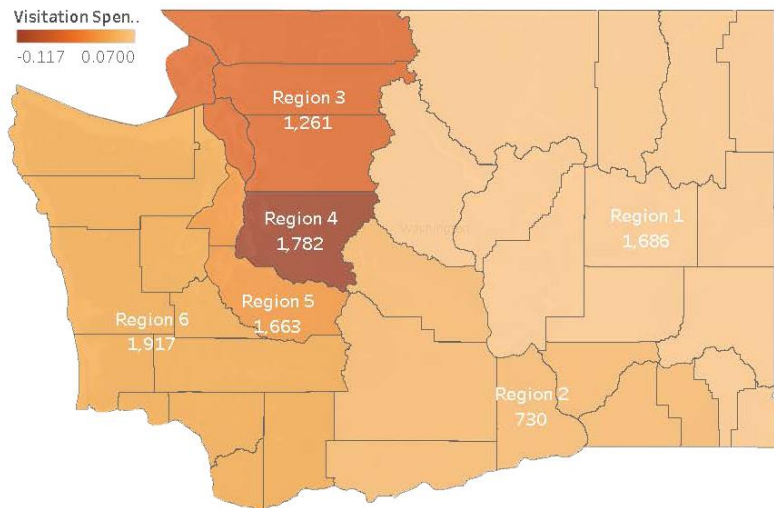
*\*Based on 12/31/18 point-in-time count*  
*\*\* Based on annual expenditures/estimated children needing a visit at 12/31/18*

DCYF’s FamLink information system does not have the capacity to track visitation service delivery. This means that DCYF cannot directly track how soon visitation starts for each child, how many or how often visits are missed, transportation-only cases and if the agency is compliant with the court’s orders. However, payment data suggests DCYF may be under-providing visitation services in Washington’s more expensive regions, where approximately one-third of children needing visitation services are placed.

<sup>11</sup> DCYF. *Visit Services Fee Table (PDF)*.

<sup>12</sup> DCYF. *DCYF Regional Structure (PDF)*.

Figure 4: Number of Children in Placement, By Region



The number displayed over each region in Figure 4 above represents the number of children statewide who are placed in each region. The heat map’s color spectrum in each region shows the difference between the percent of children in placement and percent of dollars spent on visitation. The darker colors reflect regions where we may be under-serving with visitation relative to the need.

Figure 5: Family Impact Network Area of Service

This disparity is magnified due to a restructured PCV contract in eight counties in Eastern Washington’s Region 1. In 2016, the former CA contracted with the Family Impact Network (FIN) at a higher hourly



rate of \$26.50 to help FIN retain current providers and attract new ones. In exchange, FIN agreed to provide all needed contract PCV within its area of service. FIN also agreed to enhanced performance-based contracting metrics, as required by state law.<sup>13</sup>

This inverse correlation suggests that contracted visitation is more likely to occur in regions of the state where the cost of living makes DCYF’s payment rate feasible. As the state and regional minimum wage rates increase, contracted providers are struggling to make the service requirements work under the current rate structure. This is particularly true in Regions 3 and 4, where the cost of living is relatively high and competition for employees can be fierce.

Due to budget reductions in 2008, mileage reimbursement for visitation contractors was limited to those cases that require more than 60 miles’ worth of travel, which is an additional loss for a contracted provider. This mileage reimbursement restriction also makes it difficult to provide transportation-only services where supervision isn’t required but a child needs to be transported to the visit location. These visitation referrals may not be accepted by contracted providers, leaving DCYF caseworkers to provide the transportation visitation services themselves. The lack of sufficient providers means that visits may not decrease in supervision level as quickly as they could, increase in frequency as desired or may displace other critical work for DCYF caseworkers.

<sup>13</sup> Family Impact Network. *Our Approach*.

## PARENT-CHILD VISITATION

Any unnecessary delay in initiating and maintaining a regular visitation schedule could adversely affect and delay the reunification process. Therefore, it is essential to begin visitation as soon as possible after a child’s removal from their home and to maintain a regular and predictable visitation schedule, along with continuing assessment of supervision levels and frequency of visits on all cases.

A child’s placement location is an additional challenge to meeting the need for more visitation capacity. While DCYF caseworkers make concerted efforts to place children in close proximity to their parents, many children are placed with caregivers further away. This, in turn, creates transportation challenges. When developing visitation recommendations for the court, caseworkers weigh a visit’s benefits against transportation time. Children are routinely driven across multiple counties multiple times a week to meet visitation mandates. While it may be appropriate for a child to spend significant time in a car in order to see a parent once a week, caseworkers may express concern about more frequent visits and the resulting increase in the number of hours a child spends in the car. Extended transportation time can negatively impact a child’s time in school, subsequent academic achievement and the ability to engage in extracurricular events and activities that help provide a sense of normalcy for children in out-of-home care. A child’s special physical or behavioral health care needs can further complicate visit-related transportation. Transporting a parent to the child could resolve these issues, but is not permitted under current contracts. DCYF is currently exploring the possibility of including parent-to-child transportation in future, renegotiated contracts with contracted providers and the Attorney General’s Office.

In 2015, the Legislature mandated that the former CA adopt policies to reduce the percentage of parents requiring supervised visitation. Also in 2015, a legislatively-mandated PCV workgroup found “an over-reliance on supervised visitation and a lack of understanding and clear knowledge of what to consider when determining the level of supervision.”<sup>14</sup>

As a result, CA revised its supervised visitation guidelines and indicated that “the level of supervision in the initial plan and recommended to the court in the visitation plan should be in the least restrictive setting and based on risk factors, existing danger, safety threats and protective factors.” Current data show that 68.4 percent of children in out-of-home care have a supervised visitation plan as opposed to monitored or unsupervised.<sup>15</sup>

**Table C: Required Supervision Levels in Parent-Child Visitation Plans**

Supervision Level	Region 1	Region 2	Region 3	Region 4	Region 5	Region 6	Statewide
<b>Supervised</b>	757	653	514	852	1,116	1,083	<b>4,975 (68.4%)</b>
<b>Monitored</b>	166	71	309	152	224	194	<b>1,116 (15.3%)</b>
<b>Unsupervised</b>	51	37	61	72	31	75	<b>327 (4.5%)</b>
<b>Not Yet Documented</b>	119	41	140	317	79	161	<b>857 (11.8%)</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>1,093</b>	<b>802</b>	<b>1,024</b>	<b>1,393</b>	<b>1,450</b>	<b>1,513</b>	<b>7,275 (100%)</b>

*Data from February 2018*

<sup>14</sup> DSHS *Report to the Legislature: Parent-Child Visitation (PDF)*. Children’s Administration Division of Program and Policy, Jan. 2016

<sup>15</sup> FamLink Visitation Plan data

## DCYF Improvement Strategy

**House Bill 2008** (2018) allowed PCV contracted providers' costs to be included in the formal budget forecasting process for DCYF. As of the November 2018 forecast, this process automatically adjusts DCYF's visitation budget based on forecasted caseloads and per-capita costs. This change should allow for more certainty in the budgeting for these services as caseloads or amounts of court-ordered visitation increase or decrease.

DCYF is working to free up Child and Family Welfare Services (CFWS) caseworker time to allow them to focus on engagement with parents, foster parents and children in care; ensure the provision of court-ordered and preventive services for children and families; fulfill court requirements; and excel in casework that will promote higher rates of permanency. Increasing contracted visitation provider service capacity, especially in those regions of the state where such services are under-utilized and reliance on caseworkers for visitation and transportation is high, is one tool to help accomplish this.

In 2018, DCYF surveyed contracted visitation providers and caseworkers to identify barriers impacting contracted visitation service capacity and reliability. In response to the survey's findings, DCYF plans to improve PCV contracts in three areas:

1. **Contract Rate Reimbursement:** Providers indicate the PCV reimbursement rate is not sufficient to employ and retain staff while still meeting organizational costs. DCYF supports a contract rate increase in conjunction with added service requirements, such as accepting all issued visitation referrals in a provider's contracted area of service, PBC metrics and provider employee training to improve visit quality.
2. **Mileage Reimbursement:** Reinstate mileage reimbursement to pre-recession levels, beginning when a visitation provider picks up a child for each visit. DCYF is considering innovative ways to transport the parent to the child for visits (e.g. rideshare vouchers).
3. **Transportation-Only Contracts:** Fund transportation-only visitation to allow providers to be paid for assisting with unsupervised visits. This will decrease costs by not continuing to pay the higher costs of monitored or supervised visits.

A new PCV provider contract would address the needs in the current visitation system and increase rates and reimbursements for contracted providers. A restructured contract would allow providers to meet court-ordered requirements and respond within the required timeframes.

Contracted visitation providers also reported that the process to receive criminal background check results takes too long and potential hires cannot wait a month or longer to begin working. DCYF's background check unit is working with DSHS to resolve barriers that contribute to hiring process delays.

DCYF is also working with judicial partners to safely move toward more unsupervised versus supervised visits where appropriate. CA convened four visitation educational workshops in partnership with the Office of Public Defense and the Court Improvement Training Academy between October 2017 and June 2018. The workshops focused on developing a stronger understanding of the purpose, goals and research behind visitation. They also concentrated on increasing awareness and adherence to DCYF's Parent, Child, Sibling, and Relative Visitation Policy.<sup>16</sup> The workshops promoted effective services by creating a common language to discuss visitation and promote consistent visitation policy adherence.

<sup>16</sup> DCYF Practices and Procedures 4254. *Parent, Child, Sibling, and Relative Visits*. July 1, 2016.

This strategy increased visit frequency, decreased supervision needs and slightly increased visit supervision provided by foster parents and caregivers.<sup>17</sup>

**Table D: Visitation Educational Workshops**

Setting	Target Audience	Number of Participants	Timeframes
Washington State CASA Conference	CASA	40	2017: November
Children’s Justice Conference	CASA, Attorneys, Child Welfare Professionals, Judicial Officers, Advocates and Parent Allies	60	2017: May 2018: May
Parent-Child Visitation Forums	Court Partners and DCYF Staff, Providers	Grays Harbor: 25 Thurston/Mason: 70 Whatcom: 65 Grant: 35	2017: November 2018: March, April, May
Skagit, Island and Whatcom Counties Table of Ten Launch	Court Partners and DCYF Staff	70	2017: July
Policy Refreshers for Unit and All-Staff Meetings	DCYF Staff	100	2017: October, November 2018: March, April, May, June
Parent Engagement for Field Offices and Children’s Justice Conference	DCYF Staff and Partners	215	2017: November, December 2018: January, February, March, May, June

## Parent-Child Visitation Challenge #2: Quality

Current DCYF PCV policy incorporates several best practices, but experts and DCYF staff recognize that Washington State’s current PCV model needs improvement in order to better serve families. DCYF staff believe the current PCV model does not sufficiently engage families and contributes to an environment that is not conducive to family reunification. A PCV contracted provider’s current role is to observe the visit, take notes and refrain from interaction during the visit unless there is a safety concern. This current delivery of visitation does not support engagement nor does it intentionally enhance parent strengths.

The Office of Public Defense, Administrative Office of the Courts, Washington State Parent Ally Committee and other stakeholders provide ongoing feedback on visitation service quality. Their recommendations focus on the need for a visitation service model that is more supportive and provides a more normalized experience for families. Additionally, former foster youth and parent allies offered numerous personal experiences that highlight how artificial, judgmental and uninviting typical visitation settings can be.

<sup>17</sup> FamLink Visitation Plan data.

## DCYF Improvement Strategy

Research suggests that pairing visitation with a supportive parenting education program is an effective way to increase family reunification.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, DCYF is currently piloting two practice models: *Strive* and *Supported Visits*. Both pilots seek to increase the number of reunifications and decrease the amount of time required for a child to safely reunify with their parent(s).

Partners for our Children (POC) collaborated with the former CA to develop and tested the Strive visitation model. Strive is a parent education and support program designed to provide individualized visitation services to families. Strive uses a strengths-based, trauma-informed approach to help parents create a positive environment for nurturing their relationship with their child within the context of supervised visitation. Through the program, parents are connected with a “Visit Navigator” (a visit supervisor trained in Strive) who meets with them weekly during the program to cover session content and to support them in visits to “try out” new knowledge and skills. The model focuses on early positive parent engagement by providing a more welcoming environment, parenting education, modeling positive interactions and behaviors, giving helpful feedback to the parent and observing subsequent parent-child interactions for progress.

The first formative Strive model pilot was conducted between September 2016 – 2017. Three supervised visitation providers delivered the program to 50 parents in three Western Washington counties. This small pilot’s results were encouraging with respect to parent attendance, visit quality and parent satisfaction with the Strive program. POC made some modifications to include reducing the number of sessions from 15 to five before conducting a second pilot in Eastern Washington.

The second Strive model pilot began in November 2017 in Region 1 and is still underway. POC has proposed to expand Strive to 525 families across Region 1. POC would play a supportive role with DCYF responsible for program delivery, evaluation and return on investment assessment. DCYF is currently reviewing POC’s proposal.

Before DCYF can consider expansion of Strive to other regions, the agency needs to review data related to outcomes from both short-term and long-term factors. Short-term factors include enhanced visitation experience, improved parental attendance rates, greater engagement in services and improved child well-being. DCYF will also need to review longer-term factors such as reduced time in out-of-home care, placement stability, reduced reunification time and decreased rates of re-referral.

The Supported Visitation pilot model builds on the reforms recently implemented in other states (Texas, Minnesota, Illinois, California and Utah, all of which recently went through a major restructuring of their parent-child visitation models) and was further informed by the Strive model pilot. This model seeks to improve visitation services’ provider-family interactions. The goal of this service enhancement is to provide an early supportive visitation experience for families within the first 60 days of a child’s out-of-home placement. The Supported Visitation model allows the contracted provider to be supportive and engaged in positive interactions with the family during visits and is intended to increase the overall quality of the PCV from the beginning. The Supported Visits pilot began June 1, 2018, in five counties (Grays Harbor, Thurston, Mason, Whatcom and Grant) and concluded May 31, 2019.

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<sup>18</sup>Barth, Richard P., et al. “Parent-Training Programs in Child Welfare Services: Planning for a More Evidence-Based Approach to Serving Biological Parents.” *Research on Social Work Practice*, vol. 15, no. 5, Sept. 2005, pp. 353–371, doi:10.1177/1049731505276321.

The former CA also resourced a training program intended to grow the skill sets of visitation providers. CA contracted with Kimberlee Shoecraft and the University of Washington's Nursing Child Assessment Satellite Training (NCAST) to develop and provide training to identified Supported Visitation pilot sites. Shoecraft and NCAST have extensive history providing evidence-based training around childhood development and the effects of early childhood trauma. In addition to the initial training, the pilot sites received five subsequent coaching sessions that implemented elements of the Strive model.

There, unfortunately, was no evaluation plan established in advance of the Supported Visitation intervention. OIAA is working now with program staff to determine the feasibility and opportunities for retrospective versus prospective evaluation of the Supported Visitation model. As results from both pilots become available, the Director of OIAA will make recommendations to the DCYF Secretary and agency leadership on expanded use.

Additionally, DCYF will have the opportunity to further support improved quality of PCV broadly as visitation contracts move through the DCYF outcomes-oriented PBC process. As with all DCYF client services, outcomes-oriented PBC involves identifying and operationalizing quality and outcome metrics, creating capacity for additional analytic support to measure the extent to which quality and outcome objectives are being met and establishing a baseline from which to implement continuous performance improvement efforts. DCYF will begin introducing quality metrics into CY 2020 contracts and will work on identifying outcome metrics over the next biennium.

### **Parent-Child Visitation Challenge #3: Accountability**

While FamLink Visit Plans have increased DCYF's understanding of the need for visitation, they do not provide information about how well the agency is doing in providing the required visits, nor do they identify the areas that need improvement. FamLink does not have the capacity to capture the needed data to examine the program as a whole. The missing data that DCYF would like to gather includes:

- How long it takes for the contracted provider to start providing visits,
- How many or how often visits are provided and missed, and
- Transportation-only cases.

OIAA is unable to determine if visitation impacts reunification rates, in part because FamLink does not have the capacity to collect data about visits that are provided. To do this, DCYF needs to document the estimated 764,000 contracted visits that occur each year in a different way than is done today, as well as address the workload issues that could arise from a different approach.

### **DCYF Improvement Strategy**

DCYF is working to improve accountability and data collection for PCV. In early December 2018, DCYF took steps to acquire, develop and transfer operational ownership of an improved data collection platform originally called Oliver and now renamed Sprout from POC. Sprout is a cloud-based platform designed to support multiple case management functions and currently serves primarily as a tool for collecting visitation data in Region 1. DCYF is funding development within Sprout to support PCV statewide. Once Oliver's PCV capabilities are online, DCYF will renegotiate PCV provider contracts to require Sprout usage and include PBC metrics.



## Conclusion

DCYF believes in maintaining and supporting a strong and healthy relationship between children and their parents. If a child is placed in out-of-home care, it is the family's right to have parent-child visitation when it is in the best interest of the child.

The Legislature asked DCYF to prepare a report of the strategies to expand and increase the capacity, effectiveness and reliability of contracted visitation services for families. While DCYF recognizes some progress has been made, there is much work to be done to further understand PCV issues and improve visitation outcomes. DCYF and OIAA, in collaboration with contracted providers, will work to further research and implement strategies that support a child's well-being and family connections.