

February 2001

## **Placement Decisions for Children in Long-Term Foster Care: Innovative Practices and Literature Review**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The 2000 Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to examine the best practices in other states regarding placement decisions for children in long-term foster care (EHB 2487 §607(c)). The term foster care generally refers both to family and institutional settings for children whose parents are unable to provide adequate care; placement decisions occur after a child is in state care.

The following topics are covered in this report:

- Placement decision-making;
- Research findings of children in foster care; and
- Innovative practices in other states.

A separate report describes the characteristics of Washington's children in long-term foster care and their placement history (Berliner and Fine 2001).

### **Findings**

The research findings on foster care children and placement reveals, first and foremost, the connections between events and outcomes. In simple terms, these connections can be expressed as follows:

- Children in foster care longer than three months often enter this system with psychological injuries and vulnerabilities, as well as behavioral problems.
- Behavior problems can create difficulties in a child's placement and ultimately lead to multiple placements. Multiple placements are associated with worse outcomes for children.
- Even for children with few impairments, being moved from setting to setting often increases their problems.

Given the harm associated with multiple placements, the clear ideal is connecting children with the most appropriate setting at the onset of their foster care experience, taking into account their psychological and physical needs. To help standardize such decisions, a measurement instrument can be of great value to a state.

As is the case with many standardized instruments, however, the task has proven to be more complex than it originally appeared. Research findings have revealed the following:

- Instruments vary in their ability to accurately distinguish children's problems and needs.
- Caseworkers and clinicians often resist using such an instrument, viewing it either as unhelpful or not being sure how to apply it to individual decisions.
- Placement settings with the same label (treatment foster care, therapeutic residential services) may in fact offer very different levels of services and structure, thus mitigating the connection between assessment decisions and placement services.

In reviewing states, Georgia's system of decision-making and review emerged as the most comprehensive. All children entering foster care in Georgia are assessed with a standardized instrument. A multi-disciplinary team reviews this assessment and determines the best possible placement given available resources. This approach combines the benefits of a standardized instrument with a decision-making apparatus that is multi-disciplinary and has authority for placement.