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## **Encouraging Adoption of Children in Foster Care: Trends in Washington's Financial Assistance Program**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Washington State's adoption support program encourages families to adopt children from the child welfare system who, because of age, race, physical condition, or emotional health, are considered difficult to place. The program was established by the 1971 Legislature and is intended to remove financial barriers to adoption. Adoption assistance includes help with legal costs, fees for adoption, ongoing monthly maintenance for adopted children with special needs, medical coverage, counseling reimbursements, and training opportunities for adoptive parents. The program is administered through the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS).

The 2000 legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to review the adoption support program. Through a proviso to the state budget, the Institute was directed to "examine adoption support program criteria, service level decisions, and funding methodologies" (EHB 2487 §607 (5)).

### **Key Findings**

- Children being adopted from Washington's foster care population are the same children entering the state's Adoption Support Program.
- The dramatic growth in foster care adoption is driving the dramatic growth in the Adoption Support caseload.
- Federal and state law require the program to individually tailor a child's needs with the adopting family's resources so this match works for the family.
- Unlike foster care, Adoption Support eligibility is long-term, continuing for 15 or more years for approximately half the children.
- Over time, many adoptive families are likely to need more services and financial support, not less.

The majority of families who adopt children from foster care have been enrolling in the adoption support program, thus explaining the program growth. The legislature has the option to adjust the program's criteria and payments within certain parameters. In setting policy regarding this program, the significant advantages of securing permanent homes for these children need to be considered.