



# ANNUAL FOSTER PARENT AND ADOPTIVE HOME RECRUITMENT REPORT DRAFT 2021-2022



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

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

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## Executive Summary

This report is prepared in compliance with RCW 74.13.031(2), which requires the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF, or the Department), Division of Child Welfare Programs to submit an annual report to the Governor and the Legislature on the agency's success in:

- Meeting the need for adoptive and foster home placements.
- Reducing the foster parent turnover rate.
- Completing home studies for legally-free children.
- Implementing a program per RCW 74.13.285 that obtains all known and available information concerning the child's mental, physical, health, and educational status for any child who has been in a foster home for 90 consecutive days or more.

The report provides a broad overview of foster and adoptive parent recruitment, the retention of foster and adoptive homes, the status of home studies in Washington, and the tracking of children's medical, mental, and educational status in foster care.

## Who are the Children and Youth Experiencing Foster Care?

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*“Children are one-third of our population and all of our future.”*

— *Promotion of Child Health, 1981*

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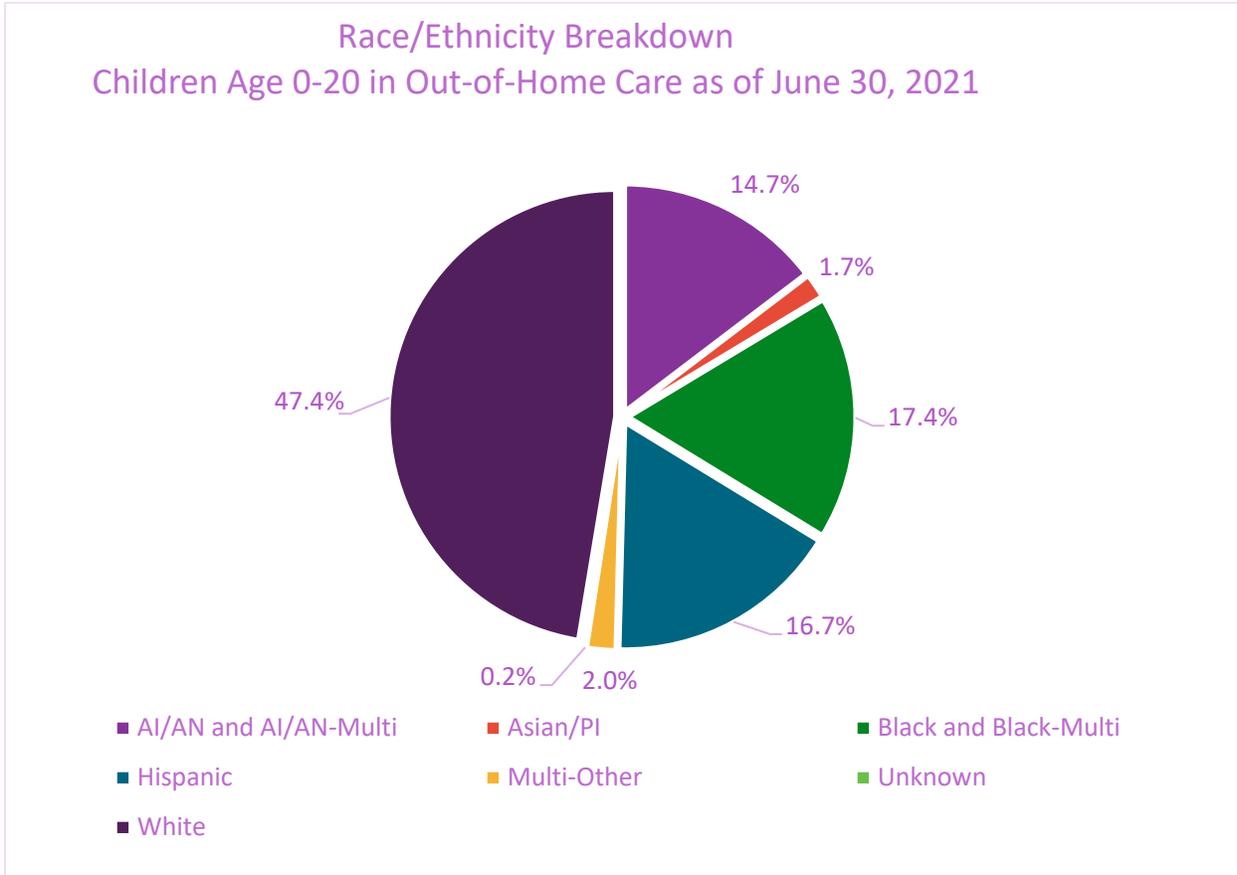
Children and youth enter the foster care system in a variety of ways. The most prominent cause is due to neglect while in the care of their parent or another person responsible. 4,165 children entered care during SFY 2021. Sixty-three percent of the entries identified neglect as one of the factors associated with the removal. Negligent treatment is the act or a failure to act, or the cumulative effects of a pattern of conduct, behavior, or inaction, that evidences a serious disregard of consequences of such magnitude as to constitute a clear and present danger to a child's health, welfare, or safety.

There is general agreement that child neglect is strongly correlated with poverty.<sup>1</sup> Families of color are disproportionately represented in DCYF's child welfare system. The National Juvenile Defender Center found in a review of national studies that child abuse and neglect rates are not higher in families of color; however, these families are disproportionately petitioned and brought into the court system and face a greater likelihood of removal of their children than white families.<sup>2</sup> Race disproportionately affects every aspect of DCYF. DCYF is actively working to improve racial, equity, and social justice for the children, youth, and families we serve as outlined in the agency's [Strategic Plan](#).

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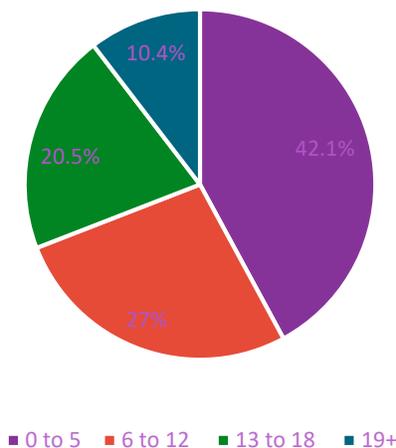
<sup>1</sup> Drake, B., & Pandey, S. (1996). Understanding the relationship between neighborhood poverty and specific types of child maltreatment. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 20(11), 1003–1018; Sedlak, A. J., Mettenburg, J., Basena, M., Peta, I., McPherson, K., & Greene, A. (2010). Fourth national incidence study of child abuse and neglect (NIS-4). *Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services*, 9, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> <https://njdc.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Addressing-Bias-Bench-Card-1.pdf>



| Race/Ethnicity of Children   | Percentage |
|--|------------|
| AI/AN and AI/AN-Multi  | 14.7%      |
| Asian/PI   | 1.7%       |
| Black and Black-Multi  | 17.4%      |
| Hispanic   | 16.7%      |
| Multi-Other  | 2.0%       |
| Unknown  | 0.2%       |
| White  | 47.4%      |
| <i>Data Source: info FamLink Relative/Non-Relative report for children/youth age 0-20 on June 30, 2021</i> |            |

Age Range Breakdown  
Children in Out-of-Home Care as of June 30, 2021



| Age Range | Percentage |
|-----------|------------|
| 0 to 5    | 42.1%      |
| 6 to 12   | 27%        |
| 13 to 18  | 20.5%      |
| 19+       | 10.4%      |

*Data Source: Caregiver Recruitment and Retention Report Data Pull July 1, 2020, to June 30, 2021.*

### Importance of Kinship Care

As of June 30, 2021, 6,959 children and youth ages 0-17 were placed in out-of-home care. Of those children and youth, 47% were placed in kinship care.

DCYF strives to keep children with their families whenever possible. When removal is unavoidable, the search for an appropriate kinship caregiver occurs. Kinship includes a relative or person known to the child and/or family. Benefits for children and youth placed in kinship care are plentiful, including minimizing trauma caused by the removal, improving the children’s wellbeing, increasing permanency for children, improving behavioral and mental health outcomes, promoting sibling ties, and preserving children’s cultural identity and community connections.<sup>3</sup> There are many family finding strategies in place as overseen by DCYF’s field operations staff and relative search units. DCYF continues to improve support and resources to kinship caregivers, as outlined in the *Caregiver Retention and Unified home study process for foster and adoptive families*.

<sup>3</sup> American Bar Association | [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public\\_interest/child\\_law/resources/child\\_law\\_practiceonline/child\\_law\\_practice/vol-36/july-aug-2017/kinship-care-is-better-for-children-and-families/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/resources/child_law_practiceonline/child_law_practice/vol-36/july-aug-2017/kinship-care-is-better-for-children-and-families/)

DCYF strives to keep children and youth in their community. When a child cannot be safely maintained in their home, and there is no available placement with a kinship caregiver, they are placed with a non-related licensed foster family. Placement in a residential or group care facility is used as a last resort for children and youth who cannot be maintained in a traditional home setting given their physical, emotional, or behavioral health needs. DCYF's primary goal for children and youth is for them to reunify. Of the 4,830 children and youth who exited the system during the past year, 65% reunified with their parents and/or family of origin.

## Recruitment of Caregivers

DCYF continuously strengthens, improves, and diversifies recruitment efforts for potential foster and adoptive families. DCYF collaborates with Child Placing Agencies (CPAs), Tribes, and the Alliance for Child Welfare Excellence to aid recruitment efforts. To meet the need for adoptive and foster home placements, DCYF uses three recruitment strategies: general, targeted, and child-specific.

### General Recruitment

This strategy helps build public interest and awareness. Recruitment messages appeal to prospective families and their desire to make a difference for children. General recruitment strategies also encourage the development of communities responsive to the unique experiences of caregivers and children in care.

DCYF launched the *Be the Way Home Recruitment Campaign* in May 2021. The campaign reinforces that permanency comes in various forms, and caregivers are part of that journey. *Be the Way Home* recognizes that caregivers provide an actual home for children in need while at the same time honoring that caregivers are instrumental in the outcomes for children in out-of-home care. Caregivers are at the heart of helping children find their way home, wherever that may end up being.

DCYF has created inclusive recruitment materials, affirming, and highlighting the need for caregivers willing to walk alongside families, championing, and supporting them on their path to reunification.

General recruitment strategies include recruitment material flyer distributions, social media to bring awareness, updates to the DCYF website, and recruitment presentations requested by the community.

Child Placing Agencies (CPAs) are responsible for executing recruitment and retention activities, considering the diversity of children placed in out-of-home care. They engage in various activities designed to recruit, train, support, and retain caregivers. CPAs work cooperatively with DCYF on foster parent recruitment activities. DCYF's Targeted Recruitment Specialists continue to build connections with CPAs in their respective regions, with a desire to collaborate. DCYF provides prospective foster parents with objective information on the paths to licensure and encourages families to choose the best fit for their family when considering how to get licensed.

### Targeted Recruitment

This strategy uses data and demographics of the children and youth in care to recruit needed resources. Targeted recruitment is culturally responsive and community-based. Targeted recruitment involves building relationships, trusts, and connections within traditionally marginalized groups of underrepresented people within the existing pool of caregivers. Targeted recruitment is data-driven and informed.

DCYF has six Targeted Recruitment Specialists (TRS) to serve in this capacity. The role of the TRS is to develop and implement recruitment campaigns targeting quality, diverse caregivers able to meet the needs of children placed in out-of-home care.

Given the data and needs of DCYF, the TRS are focusing efforts on the following recruitment focus:

- Racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse caregivers to meet the needs of children placed in out-of-home care.
- Being an open and affirming organization for Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) caregivers, and children/youth.
- Finding homes licensed for three children or more children to accommodate siblings.
- Caregivers with the ability to meet the needs of medically fragile children.
- Developing the existing pool of caregivers to provide care for children with extensive emotional, behavioral, and physical needs.
- Reducing the use of exceptional cost placements.

TRS continue to focus efforts on high removal zip codes and targeted populations throughout recruitment efforts to grow awareness and resources. Additionally, the TRS works hard to build connections with important stakeholders, community groups, and partners to understand the needs of the diverse communities across the regions.

Examples of recruitment related activities the TRS have completed to date include:

- Zip code specific back-to school-drives, block parties, and community events.
- In-person tabling events collaborating with non-profits and CPA's.
- Establishing community relationships and identifying community leaders.
- Virtual foster parent recruitment events and networking.
- Attended cultural events.
- Creating and distributing recruitment flyers in 14 languages, view an example recruitment flyer [here](#).

## Prospective Foster Parents

DCYF received prospective foster parent (PFP) inquiries from four primary sources: DCYF Website, Northwest Adoption Exchange, the AdoptUSKids website, and the Statewide Recruitment Information Center toll-free hotline.

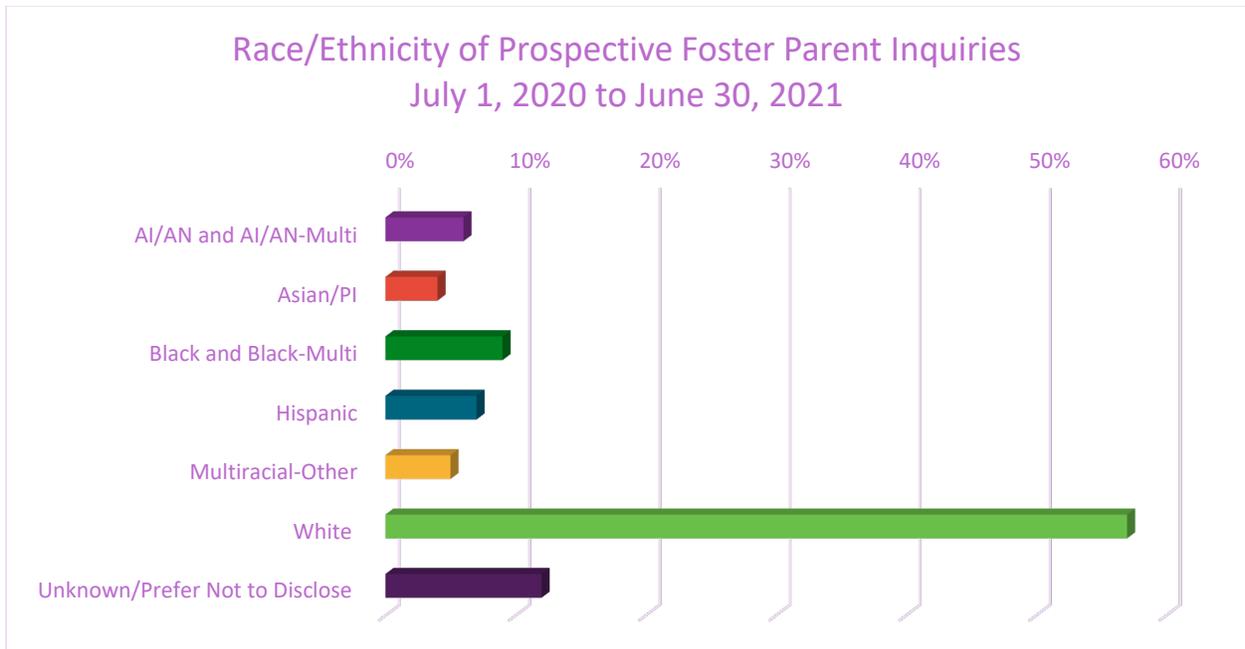
From July 1, 2020, to June 30, 2021, 4,234 PFP's were logged into the Statewide Recruitment Information Center. Part of the Retention and Support Contract [Alliance CaRES Program] includes supporting prospective foster parents and kinship caregivers through inquiry, initial training, and submitting their licensing application. Due to delays caused by COVID-19, the contract was not signed until December 15, 2020, and was not fully functional until March 15, 2021. From March 15, 2021, the CaRES program has been engaging PFP's and providing pre-licensure support.

### Prospective Foster Parent Inquiries Received FY 2021

| Month     | Year | Inquiries |
|-----------|------|-----------|
| July      | 2020 | 312       |
| August    | 2020 | 380       |
| September | 2020 | 338       |
| October   | 2020 | 368       |
| November  | 2020 | 394       |
| December  | 2020 | 383       |
| January   | 2021 | 403       |
| February  | 2021 | 338       |
| March     | 2021 | 344       |
| April     | 2021 | 356       |
| May       | 2021 | 326       |
| June      | 2021 | 292       |
| Total     |      | 4234      |

*Data Source: Northwest Resources Associates, State Recruitment Information Center (SRIC); Inquiries by prospective foster parents July 1, 2020, to June 30, 2021*

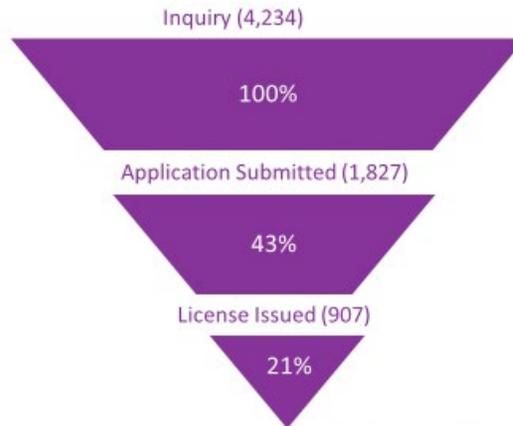
**32% of the PFP inquiries received, reported a race/ethnicity outside of White.**



When comparing the number of PFP inquiries received, to licensing applications and licenses issued, 42% resulted in a licensing application, and 22% resulted in a foster care license. Generally speaking, 78% of prospective foster parent inquiries did not result in a foster care license. This value has improved from 2019

data, resulting in a 14% licensure rate. The DCYF Recruitment and Retention team explores barriers to engagement in the licensing process and ways to enhance engagement.

## Licensing Pathway: Inquiries, Applications, Licenses July 2020 to June 2021



79% drop off when looking at total number of inquiries received compared to total number of licenses issued during the same time period.

\* Figures are calculated based on general numbers received in each category during the identified time period. They are not tied to individual record outcomes.



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SRIC Inquiry Report July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021  
InfoFamlink Licensed Foster Home Applications by Month (7/1/2020 to 6/30/2021)  
InfoFamlink Licensed Foster Home Report (7/1/2020 to 6/30/2021) \*New License Only\*

## Licensed Foster Homes

At the conclusion of state FY2021, DCYF had 4,813 licensed foster homes, 35% Child Placing Agency homes, and 65% state-licensed foster homes. Over the past year, DCYF has seen a 5% decline in licensed foster homes. Many reasons can attest to the home closures, including but not limited to:

- COVID-19 Pandemic.
- Lack of a retention and support contracts from July 1, 2020, to March 15, 2021 (eight months).
- Provider file clean-up during maintenance shift from LD Assessment to Safety and Monitoring (SAM) team.

It is important to note that quantity alone is not a measure of success when reviewing licensed foster home data. DCYF needs active, licensed families willing to be a placement resource for children and youth placed in out-of-home care. We need diverse families open to general foster care, which includes caring for children and youth short or long term.

There are approximately 4,700 vacant beds in DCYF licensed foster homes, both CPA and state. This indicates we do not have a “placement shortage” but a shortage of caregivers willing and able to be a respite or placement resource. This is especially true with children and youth experiencing increased mental, behavioral, and physical health needs.

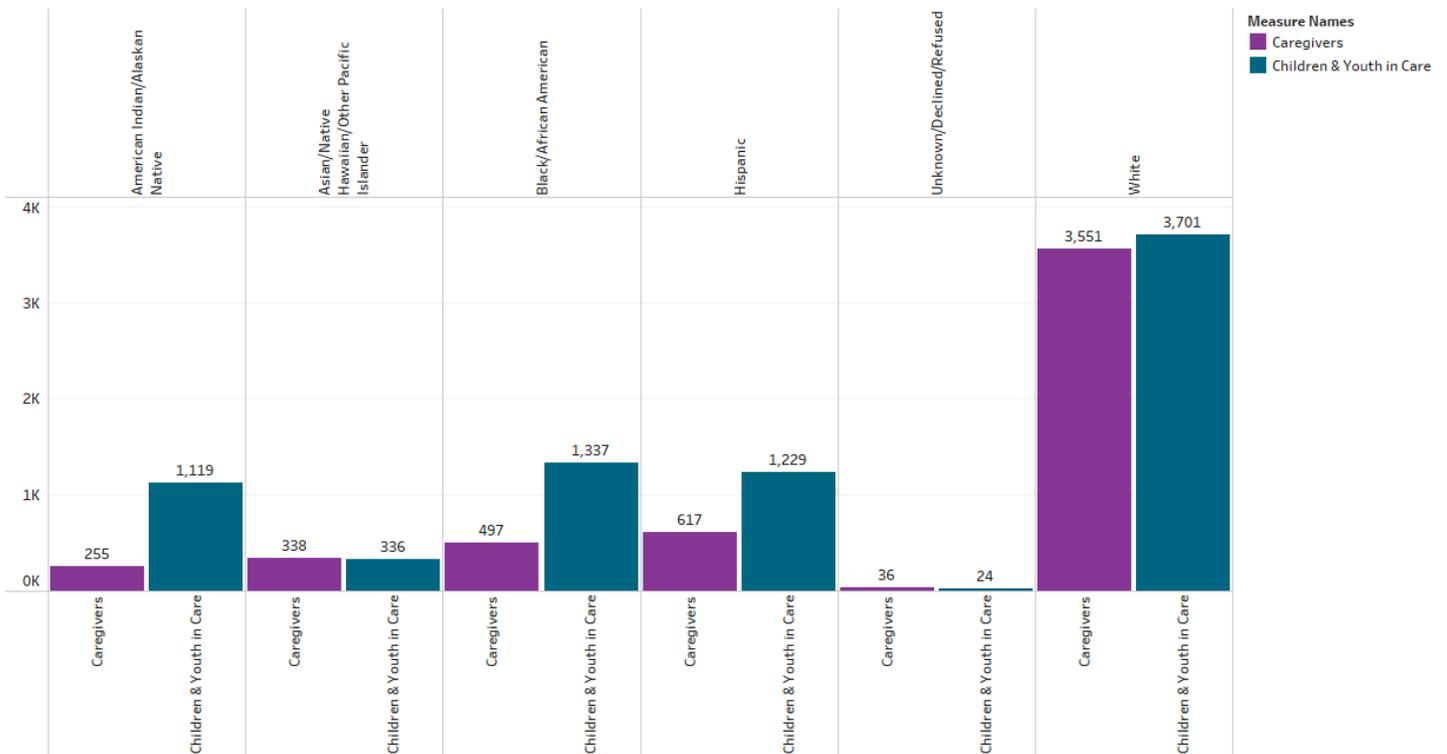
During recruitment connections, events, and activities, TRS are specifically looking to identify caregivers who are:

- Supportive of siblings staying together.
- Racially and culturally diverse.
- Open and affirming of LGBTQIA+ youth.
- Aware that foster care is temporary.
- Supportive of parents and their path towards reunification.
- Open to caring for medically fragile/medically complex children.
- Open to caring for children with extensive emotional, behavioral, and physical needs.

It is important that the pool of licensed caregivers reflect that of the children, youth, and families served by DCYF. As of June 2021, 26% of licensed foster homes included a caregiver with a race/ethnicity outside of white, while 52% of children and youth placed in out-of-home care had a race/ethnicity outside of white.

The chart below shows the statewide disproportionate demographics of licensed foster homes compared to that of children and youth ages 0-20 placed in out-of-home care on June 30, 2021. Youth ages 18-20 are included in counts of children and youth compared to licensed foster homes because these youth are in extended foster care and may be placed in foster homes.

Statewide Disproportionality Demographics June 30, 2021



When examining this information to determine ratios for children compared to caregivers, American Indian/Alaskan Native children and youth see the greatest disproportionality, in that there are 4.4 children and youth to every one home/caregiver. DCYF is invested in improving these ratios through active efforts in targeted recruitment. Recruitment of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities is a process that takes time, intentionality and follow through to build trust given historical and systemic racism by the

government. Additional resources to support American Indian/Alaskan Native recruitment are needed to bolster engagement in this area.

| Statewide Race/Ethnicity Ratios of Child and Youth in Out-of-Home Care compared to Race/Ethnicity of Licensed Caregivers |
|--|
| 4.4 American Indian/Alaskan Native Child To 1 American Indian/Alaskan Native home/caregiver                              |
| 1 Asian/Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander Child To 1 Asian/Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander home/caregiver                            |
| 2.7 Black/African American Child To 1 Black/African American home/caregiver  |
| 2 Hispanic Child to 1 Hispanic home/caregiver  |
| 1 White Child To 1 White home/caregiver  |
| .7 Unknown Child To 1 Unknown home/caregiver   |
| <i>Data source: InfoFamlink Caregiver Recruitment and Retention Report, Statewide June 30, 2021</i>                      |

### Child Specific Recruitment

This strategy focuses on recruiting existing or prospective caregivers for specific children and youth in foster care. Child-specific recruitment focuses on an individual child and their need for permanency. Children and youth do not achieve permanency for various reasons. This form of recruitment seeks to find caregivers who will best match a child’s unique needs.

DCYF utilizes a number of child-specific recruitment methods to identify prospective adoptive families including:

- Local and national adoption exchanges.
- Local events such as KidsFests.
- Monthly Adoption Consortium meetings.
- Wendy’s Wonderful Kids (WWK) child-specific recruitment.
- Communication regarding adoptive resources between LD, placement desks, and adoptions.
- Case management to identify relatives or fictive kin such as teacher.

Information from FY 2020 and FY 2021 found that 50% of children and youth who had been legally free for one year or longer were between the ages of 12-17. For this reason, child-specific recruitment efforts are centered on the 12 to 17 age group. There are approximately 1,120 legally-free children in out-of-home care. There are between 180-220 legally-free children and youth in need of an identified permanent home at any given time.

The referral process for participation in the various recruitment strategies depends on the child or youth’s legal status. Children and youth who are legally free can participate, while court approval or parental permission is required for children or youth whose parental rights are intact. The [“Child-Specific Recruitment in Washington State”](#) publication discussed in the most recent legislative report continues to be utilized by staff and external partners. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, KidsFests and similar events were not held during the past year.

## Local and National Adoption Exchanges

DCYF contracts with Northwest Resource Associates (NWRA) to provide two adoption exchanges. NWRA is the parent agency for the two adoption exchanges: Northwest Adoption Exchange (NWAE) and Washington Adoption Resource Exchange (WARE). The national adoption exchange, AdoptUSKids, is another tool used for recruitment. NWAE manages the majority of the AdoptUSKids profiles for DCYF, except for Regions 3 and 4.

NWAE and WARE provided services to 217 youth in FY2021 compared to 230 youth in FY2020. The decrease in the number of children served is primarily due to a three-month lapse in the personal services contract at the start of FY2021. Of the 217 youth served, 62 have been placed in an identified permanent placement.

*Please see attached report from NWAE for further statistical detail.*

## In-Depth Profiles

In-Depth Profiles continue to be a necessary intervention for specialized recruitment services for Washington youth. During FY2021, 30 youth were served, and two were placed in a permanent home. In comparison for FY2020, 36 youth were served with 12 youth being placed in a permanent home. The discrepancy in the difference of placed children between the two fiscal years is in part due to COVID-19 limitations.

*Please see attached report from NWAE for further statistical detail.*

## Adoption Consortium

Adoption Consortium is a monthly virtual service that assists caseworkers in connecting with families who wish to adopt through the foster care system. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, DCYF could not facilitate an in-person consortium that typically occurs once a year. Please refer to [CWP 0071 "What is Adoption Consortium?"](#) for further details about this service.

During FY2021<sup>4</sup>, 143 youth and 128 families were presented<sup>5</sup> at the consortium. A number of the youth and families were presented more than once during the past fiscal year. Of the 143 youth presented, eight have finalized adoption and 32 have either identified an adoptive family or are in the process of completing a permanent plan.

Below are children and youth demographics presented at Adoption Consortium and the resulting outcomes.

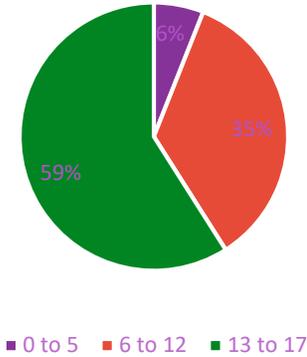
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<sup>4</sup> Due to furloughs in FY2021, consortium did not occur in July 2020.

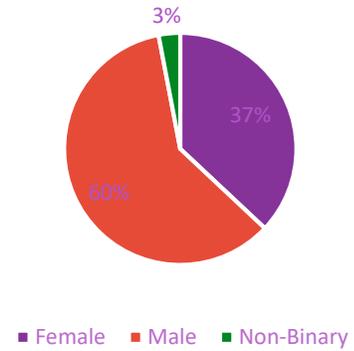
<sup>5</sup> Prior to 2019, data regarding consortium was not collected which resulted in data for the purpose of this report were being reviewed by calendar year versus fiscal year. Beginning FY2021 consortium data will be provided in the fiscal year format.

**Children and Youth Demographics Served through Adoption Consortium**

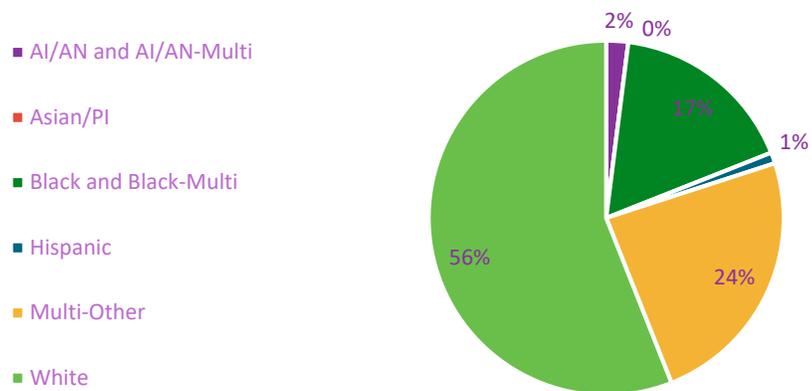
Age of Children and Youth



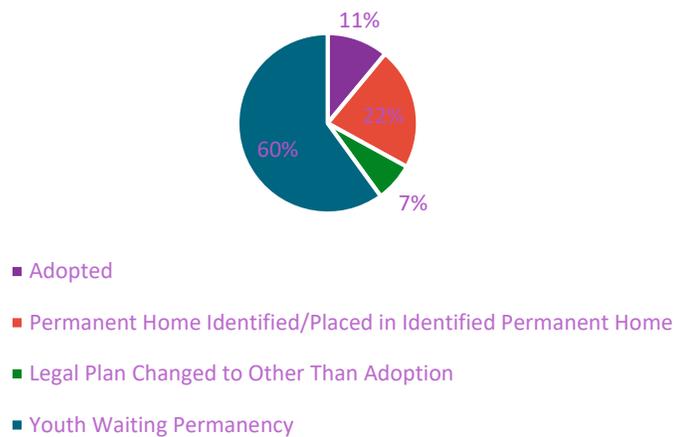
Identified Gender of Children and Youth



Race/Ethnicity of Children and Youth



Permanency Status



## Permanency from Day 1 Grant

The Permanency from Day 1 (PFD1) grant has two strategies that impact placement providers:

- Enhanced Permanency Planning Meetings.
- Enhance Youth Recruitment.

Enhanced Permanency Planning meetings were implemented in 19 offices in Regions 1, 4, and 6 in January 2021, and as of September 1, 2021, impacts 252 cases. These family meetings include parents, youth, caregivers, and family supports. They are inclusive, transparent and ensure that information is shared with families to support timely reunification or, if necessary, an alternative permanent plan.

Enhanced Youth Recruitment is specific to legally-free youth, ages 12 to 17 who are not in a permanent placement. This involves approximately 200 youth statewide. This strategy promotes youth voice in decision-making for case planning by facilitating a new recruitment process called Reverse Matching. Reverse Matching enables youth to view profiles of potential placement families and choose families that they feel would be a potential positive home for them. Reverse Matching Events took place in April and July 2021 and served 18 youth and 50 families. Of the 18 youth, six have connected with families.

DCYF does not identify in FamLink those licensed families for foster and adoption placement. In cooperation with Licensing, the PFD1 grant utilizes a grant-funded position to review newly licensed homes to identify those families licensed for placement of older (over age 10), legally free youth. Between January and April 2021, over 90 families were identified. On average, six families have been identified per month as potential placement for older youth in need of placements. The Adoption Program Manager contacts families identified through this strategy in order to ensure the families are educated on the accessibility of recruitment services available in Washington.

To support identification of potential placement families, the PFD1 grant also provides funding to promote increased family profiles on the Washington Adoption Resource Exchange (WARE). This allows workers and youth to view family profiles on the Exchange for potential placements. This funding provides supports to families seeking potential permanent placements as well as resources for both families and workers.

Additionally, the PFD1 grant has initiated written recruitment plans called Youth Engagement Permanency Plan. This document allows for a youth to express what they wish for their future and allows for a singular place for caseworkers to document the various recruitment strategies utilized to provide the youth with permanency. The way these documents are written is in a youth-friendly and caseworker-friendly manner, including a guidebook for caseworkers on how to have difficult conversations about permanency with youth. The documents and the guidebook are in process of being reviewed.

### **Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption – Wendy’s Wonderful Kids**

Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption (DTFA) – Wendy’s Wonderful Kids (WWK) is a child-focused recruitment program geared to finding permanent homes for children awaiting adoption in foster care by

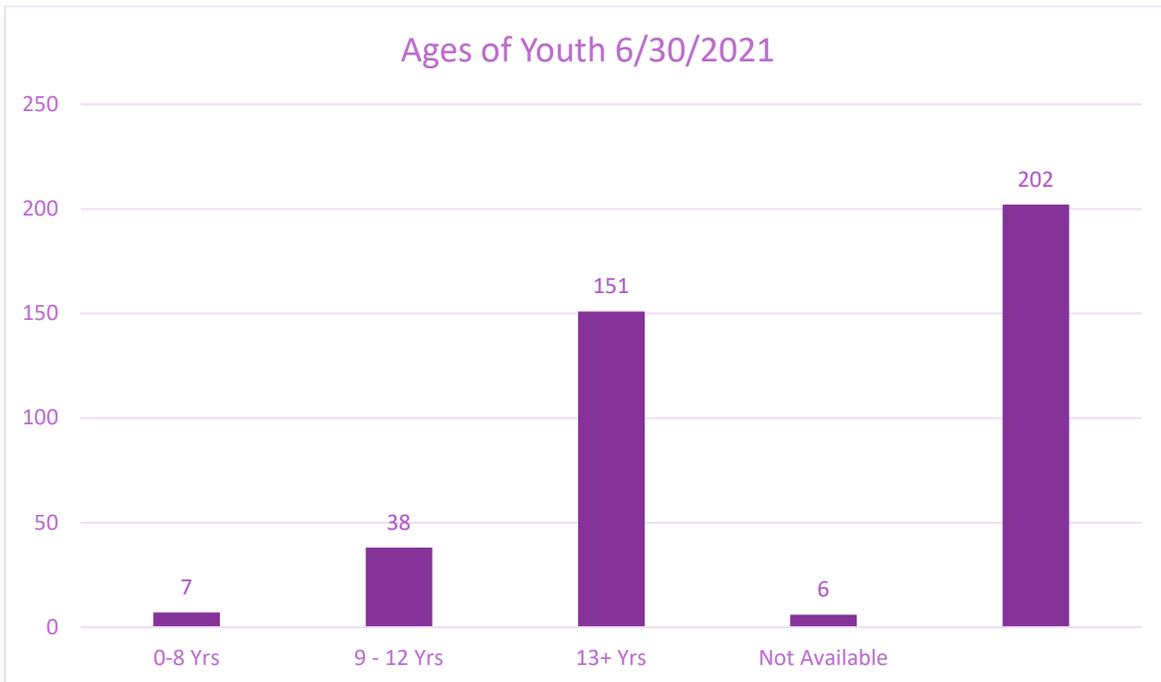
utilizing an extensive family and record search. Over the past several years, Washington State has contracted with DTFA to provide this service through a subcontract with Children’s Home Society (CHS). After a longstanding and excellent working relationship with Children’s Home Society, in late winter 2020, DCYF was approached to explore its interest in bringing this program in-house as CHS was exploring a different agency-wide focus. CHS chose the final date as the DTFA subcontractor as June 30, 2021.

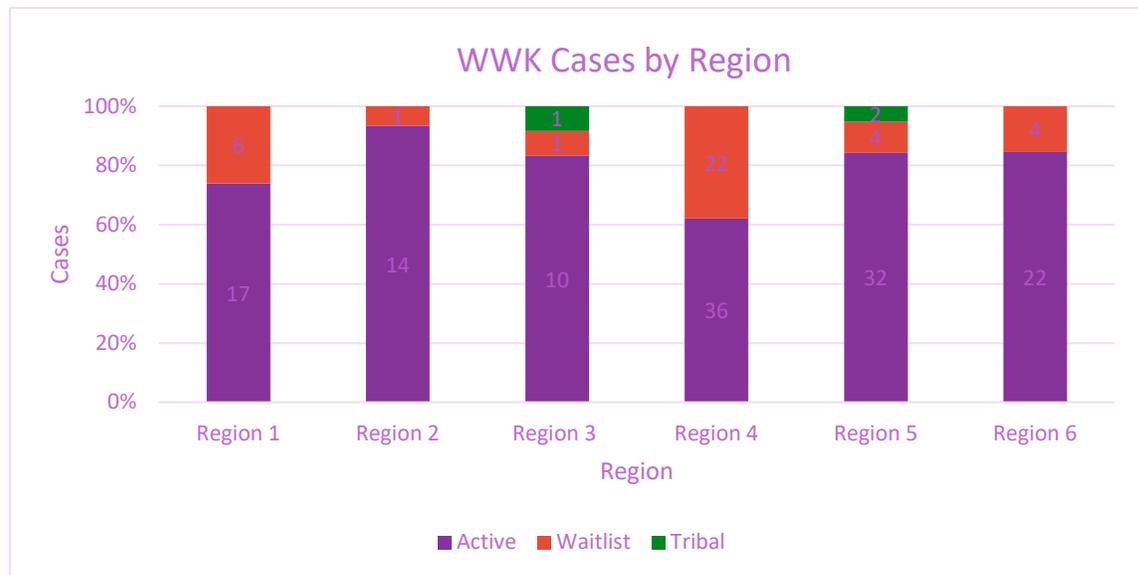
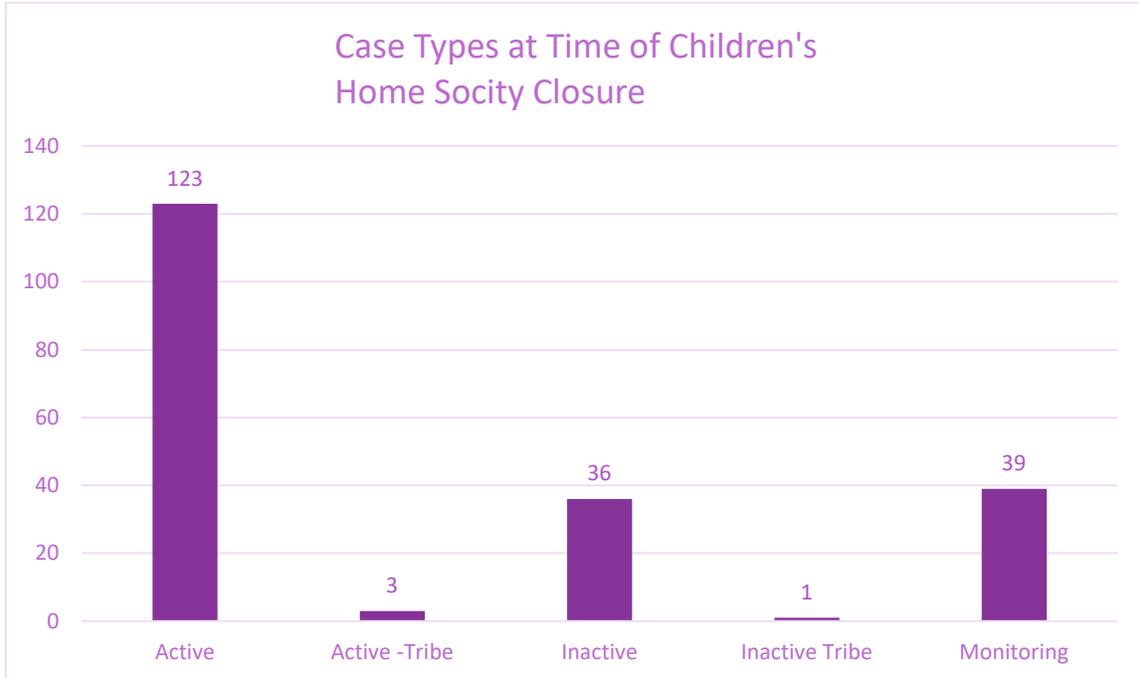
With support and guidance from DTFA, DCYF transferred the model on July 1, 2021. Positions have been approved, and the preferred candidate accepted the recruitment supervisor position. The recruiter positions were scheduled for interviews in early November 2021 and the newly hired supervisor will participate in hiring the recruitment team.

The final data received from Children’s Home Society showed 203 youth were being followed by CHS. The age of the children, case status, and case type were gathered from the final spreadsheet received from CHS on June 26, 2021.

A hand count was used for the chart presentations. Youth served by age is based on the age of the youth at the time of the final report. Category Status is based on the case status at the time of the final CHS report. Case status is broken down according to the type of status: active means the program is actively searching for a home, monitored means there is no active recruitment, and inactive means the youth is matched and successful in their current placement. The case type means that the youth is being served in one of the status categories, is a tribal case, or is on a waiting list for assignment.

**Wendy’s Wonderful Kids Exit Data from CHS, June 26, 2021**





## Adoption Improvements

As part of the PDF1 grant, the Adoption Program Manager provides the adoption management team with a list of new home studied families seeking to adopt. In addition, the Adoption Program Manager sends emails to the new home studied families with an introduction and information regarding the various recruitment services they have access to. This process has significantly increased the number of registered families with WARE and are participating in consortium.

In addition, through the PDF1 grant, WARE has added a family mapping system. This map official launched in August 2021 but was beta-tested in the prior months. The map is interactive and pinpoints where in the state

a family resides. This map has a built-in capacity to provide a picture of the family and a small blurb about what population of children or youth the family is seeking to adopt.

As a result of the past success of the In-Depth Profile strategy, DCYF and NWAEE have collaborated to expand to an additional 40 children in the 9 to 12 age range in FY22. The hope is the addition of this age range will assist youth in having a voice at an even earlier age. NWAEE has hired additional staff to provide this service.

## Retention of Caregivers

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*“Just as you would not begin filling the bathtub without first stopping the drain, the retention of resource families should be addressed prior to or in tandem with recruitment...Resource families are a state asset...Some [state] advocates estimate the price of a resource family to start around \$25,000. This includes the cost of recruiting, training and approving a family.”*

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This 2018 quote from [an article](#) in *The Imprint, Youth and Family News* pointedly captures the value of foster and kinship caregivers and the importance of retaining existing caregivers. DCYF is committed to taking a balanced approach to recruitment and retention that recognizes the importance and vitality of our existing caregivers while supporting new and emerging caregivers.

Since restructuring DCYF’s recruitment and retention program, the focus of retention efforts has been:

- Stand-up, build, and develop recognition and awareness of the new caregiver retention and support program in partnership with the Alliance for Child Welfare Excellence.
- Strengthen and build awareness of the support for kinship families.
- Collect and utilize caregiver-related data from multiple sources to identify areas of strength and those needing improvement.

The Alliance for Child Welfare Excellence launched the Caregiver Retention, Education, and Support (CaRES) program in March of 2021 as DCYF’s new retention and support contractor. The CaRES-DCYF partnership marks the first instance of DCYF and its retention contractor intentionally developing a program responding to the unique needs of *both* foster and kinship families. The CaRES program includes:

- **Support at key points**
  - All prospective caregivers receive an email and caregivers who reside in the 2020 top 25 removal zip codes receive a phone call.
  - CaRES staff individually calls all state-licensed caregivers when they receive their initial license and first placement.
  - All kinship caregivers (regardless of licensing status) receive a supportive call when they have a new placement.
- **Ongoing support**

- Topic-specific, facilitated discussion groups that provide continuing education credits to licensed caregivers. The topics covered in these groups were identified by caregivers through a CaRES survey and include book clubs, self-care, and parenting specific populations of children and youth such as teens and infants.
- Virtual, drop-in groups are available for prospective foster parents, caregivers experiencing grief and loss, and kinship caregivers.
- Community groups provide local opportunities to build connections with other caregivers
- Information about the facilitated discussion, drop-in, and community groups is available at <https://www.alliancecarescommunity.org/support-groups/>
- Peer mentoring with current or former foster parents and/or kinship caregivers. Learn more about the CaRES staff, mentors and specialists at <https://www.alliancecarescommunity.org/about-us/>

Feedback from caregivers participating in these CaRES opportunities was the following:

- “The time to connect with other parents really helped with the feelings of isolation during COVID”
- “This class was so enjoyable for me that I felt uplifted afterwards. The facilitator was so engaging and easy to talk to as well as the other parent. It was a great class”
- “I appreciated the relaxed structure with specific goals and questions but enough time for the group to thoroughly discuss how it relates to everyone’s personal situations and brainstorm helpful ideas”
- “Connection with the book we read and the other parents to validate and normalize the experiences in fostering”

CaRES has provided (March through July 2021):

- 1,529 responses to prospective foster parent inquiries.
- 1,964 calls to provide support to existing caregivers.
- 475 caregivers with support in a group setting.

The Alliance has contracted with Amara, a child-placing agency, to provide support to kinship caregivers and LGBTQIA+ caregivers and caregivers of LGBTQIA+ children and youth (learn more about the Amara partnership by visiting [their webpage](#)). CaRES (including the Alliance and Amara) has built connections with the Washington State Kinship Navigator program and program awareness and presence at the Kinship Care Oversight Committee.

DCYF, the Alliance, and Amara are committed to and actively looking for opportunities to grow and strengthen the network of supports provided through CaRES. For example, staff across the retention partnership heard caregivers were experiencing significant stress and sadness when a child or youth was moved out of their home. CaRES launched a facilitated discussion and drop-in grief and loss groups to access support and community with other caregivers.

CaRES also tried to meet the need for local, in-person connections while mitigating COVID risk. They have launched community group play dates in multiple locations. Caregivers meet at a park and connect while

children play or explore Washington’s local parks. CaRES and DCYF continue to expand the network of retention offerings in response to caregiver needs and feedback.

| Support Available to Foster Parents and Kinship Caregivers  |                                 |   |
|---|---------------------------------|---|
| Provided Directly by DCYF   | Foster Parents and Licensed Kin | Kinship Caregivers (who are not licensed) |
| Monthly foster care maintenance reimbursements  | X                               |   |
| Increased maintenance reimbursements based on an assessment of the child’s needs                        | X                               |   |
| \$200 clothing voucher at a child or initial youth placement and/or once per year, or as authorized     | X                               | X   |
| Transportation reimbursement for transporting children and youth  | X                               | X   |
| <u>Foster Care Liability and Reimbursement Program</u>  | X                               | X   |
| Weekly <u>Caregiver Connection</u> posts and monthly Caregiver Connection Wrap-Up emails                | X                               | X   |
| Regional, Quarterly Foster Parent Consultation (1624) Team meetings                                     | X                               |   |
| Provided in Partnership with DCYF   |                                 |   |
| Retention, child-specific, and exchange respite   | X                               | X   |
| Non-needy, child-only Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)                                    |                                 | X   |
| Ongoing caregiver training through the Alliance for Child Welfare Excellence                            | X                               | X   |
| Caregiver Retention, Education and Support (CaRES) program  | X                               | X   |
| Child care payments for working caregivers  | X                               | X   |
| Foster, Retention, Intervention & Support Team (FIRST) and toll-free phone line 866-393-6186            | X                               |   |
| Scholarships to the <u>Foster Parent Alliance of Washington State’s Northwest Caregivers Conference</u> | X                               | X   |
| <u>Washington State Foster Home Camping Program</u>   | X                               | X   |
| <u>Treehouse’s Holiday Magic Program</u>  | X                               | X   |
| Pass Programs at the <u>Pacific Science Center, Woodland Park Zoo, and Seattle Aquarium</u>             | X                               | X   |

To support DCYF's goal that caregivers are treated as full and respected partners and as a continuous quality improvement strategy, DCYF contracts with the Research and Data Analysis (RDA) division of the Department of Social and Health Services to conduct a robust survey of Washington State's foster parents and kinship caregivers.

The 2020 survey was conducted between November 2019 and September 2020 and included 1,346 caregivers. Both foster parents (n=591) and kinship caregivers (n=755) participated in the survey.

Key takeaways include:

- **Caregivers report that they appreciate DCYF staff who are:**
  - Accessible, provide help quickly, and offer reassurance during challenging time.
  - Active listeners and take action based on caregiver input.
  - Interested in understanding caregivers' perspectives without judgment.
  - Respectful of caregivers' other commitments.
  - Inclusive and notify caregivers of meetings, hearings, and other key opportunities.
- **Caregivers expressed concern about:**
  - Differences in satisfaction based on their caseworker or office.
  - Lack of respect, feeling undervalued, and being treated as a "babysitter."
  - Staff listening and acting upon caregiver perspective on the needs of children.
  - The critical importance of communication.
  - Prioritizing the best interests of children and youth.

Survey reports (survey launched in 2012) are available at <https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/services/foster-parenting/surveys>. The survey results indicate that we need to strengthen relationships between caregivers and staff and we have work to do to get to a place in which caregivers are seen and treated as full team members.

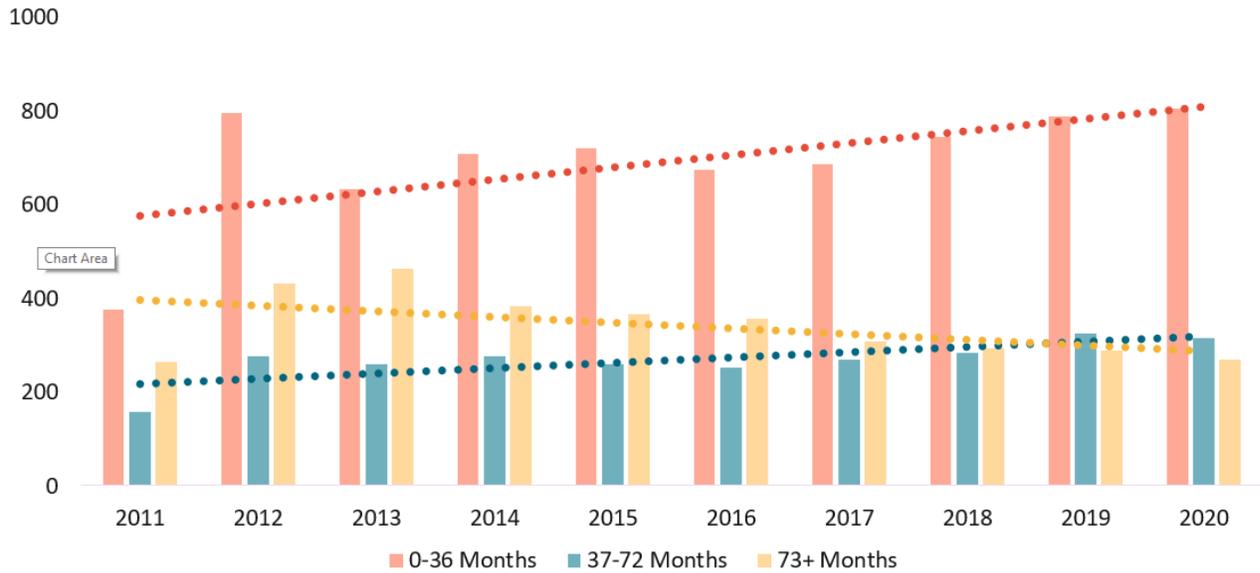
### Foster Home Turn-over, Causes and Recommendations

FamLink administrative data and foster home closure reasons also illuminate reasons for caregiver attrition.

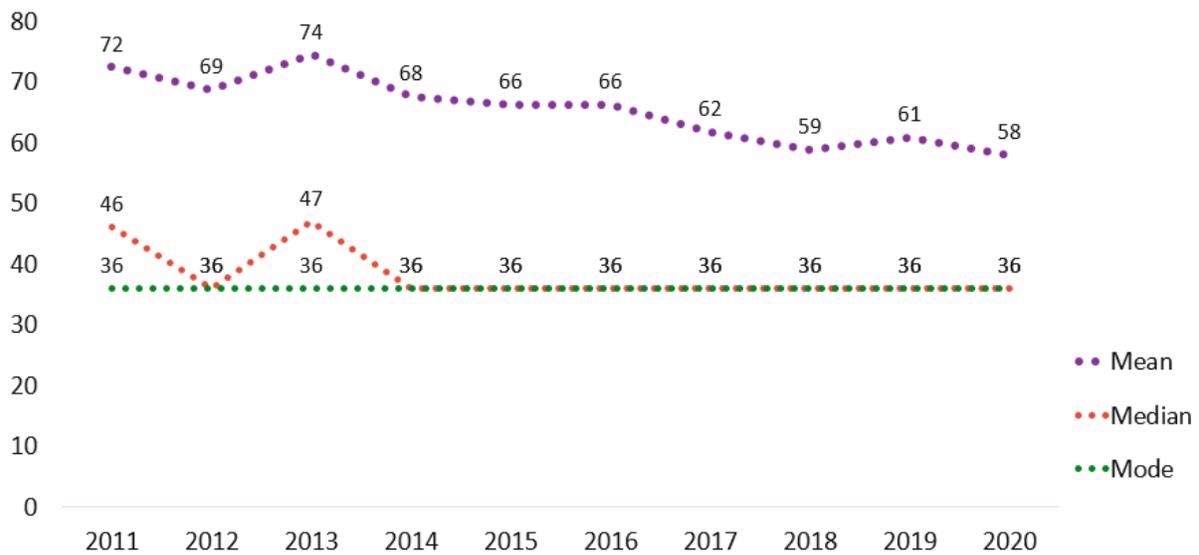
The chart below *Foster Home Closures by Year and Months Retained* indicates that more foster parents are closing their license within the initial three-year license period, and attrition amongst homes licensed more than 37 months have been relatively stable since 2017.

Analysis of the average months foster homes are retained reveals that while the mean average months retained in 2020 was 58, the median and mode averages indicate the prevalence of homes closing at the first renewal period. To increase the average number of months a foster parent(s) is licensed, DCYF needs to target retention prior to the first license renewal period and the 58-months post licensure.

### Foster Home Closures by Year and Months Retained

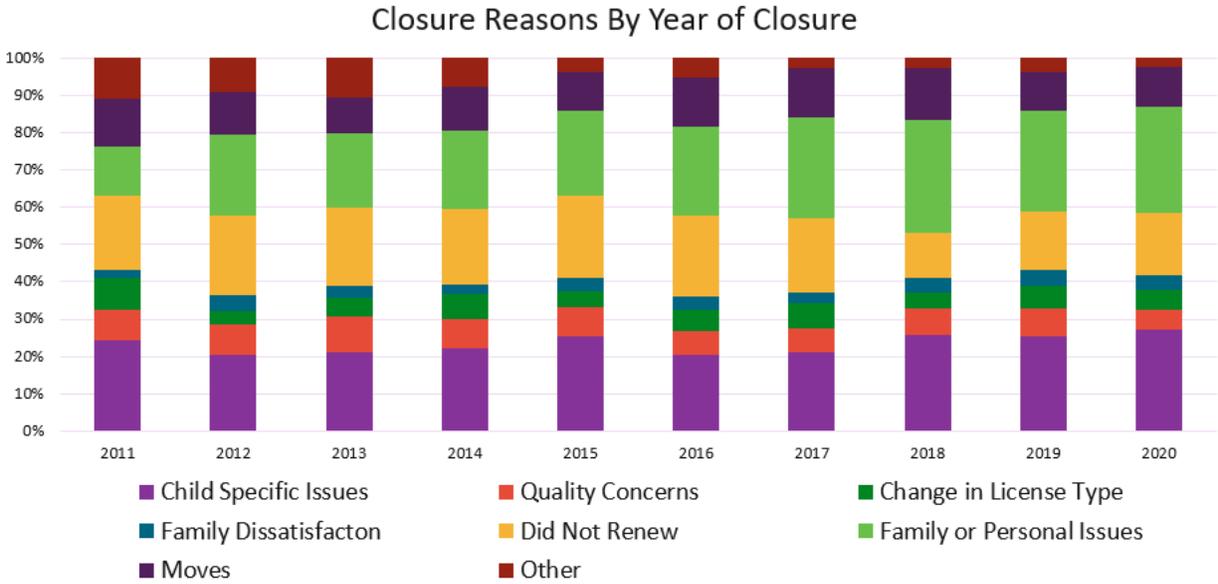


### Average Months Retained by the Year of License Closure

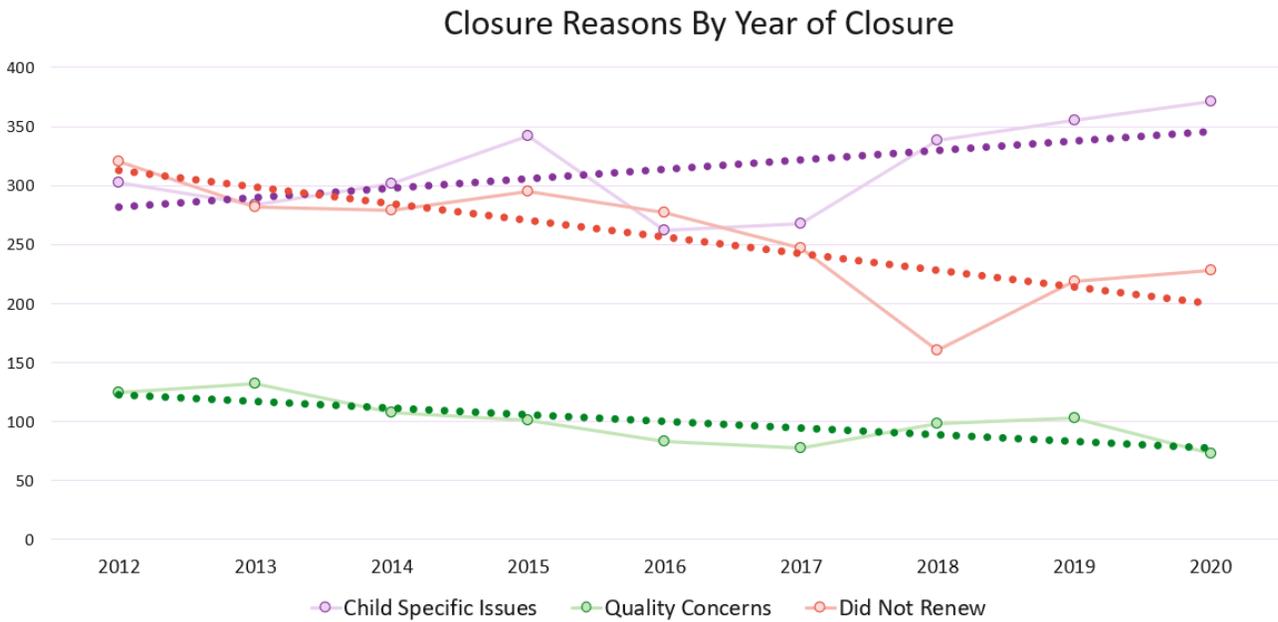


Analysis of foster home closure reasons indicates that the reasons foster parents (including licensed kin) close their licenses are consistent over time.

Foster home closures for quality concerns are decreasing over time, however, homes closing for child specific reasons (such as completion of an adoption) appear to be increasing. There is also a steady decline in the number of homes closing because they did not renew their license.



Closure reasons also indicate that over time only a very small percentage of homes close their license to move to a private child-placing agency (4-5%) or due to overall dissatisfaction with DCYF (1-2%).



DCYF has access to two other data narratives regarding caregiver retention: DCYF’s Constituent Relations (CR) and the Office of the Family and Children’s Ombuds (OFCO). OFCO data mirrors data captured in the caregiver survey, administrative data, and CR pointing to concerns related to moves, transitions, and general caregiver-staff relations. Information from constituent relations reveals that the number of complaints received from caregivers, cluster around concerns related to placement and placement moves.

In 2021 and into 2022 DCYF will act upon this data using the following strategies:

- Develop a CaRES retention touchpoint before the first license renewal.

- Continue to collect, analyze, disseminate, and act upon caregiver-related data from multiple sources including:
  - The Office of the Family and Children’s Ombuds
  - DCYF Constituent Relations
  - CaRES monthly, quarterly and annual report
  - FamLink administrative data
  - Annual Caregiver Survey
- Grow existing and explore new partnerships to expand the network and array of support to caregivers:
  - Mockingbird Society and Mockingbird Family
  - Treehouse
  - Washington State’s Public Libraries
  - Fostering Great Ideas
- Promote, advertise and ensure staff awareness of CaRES and other caregiver supports.
- Leverage internal partnership between the Licensing Division, Child Welfare Programs, and Field Operations to strengthen caregiver-staff relationships.

## Unified Home Study Process for Foster and Adoptive Families

Washington State has used a unified approach to the home study since 2011. A unified home study is a comprehensive assessment that evaluates potential and current caregiver ability to provide a safe home, the quality of care needed by children and youth, and an environment that is nurturing, respectful, and supportive. It includes a recommendation pertaining to the placement and legal permanency. The theory of this approach assumes a non-expiring home study will be beneficial for children and youth in care because all caregivers will be prepared to adopt, if that is the legal outcome of the case. It is a one-size-fits-all model that applies the legal requirements to adopt ([RCW 26.33.190](#)) to 100% of caregiver(s).

Data from 2017-2020, show only 24% of children exit care via adoption and 3% exit care via guardianship. Exception(s) to the unified home study are permitted, on a case-by-case basis. However, a case-by-case approach leans towards inconsistency and is inequitable. Inherent in the unified home study is a value of legal permanency, especially in the form of adoption. By applying adoption requirements to every applicant and caregiver, through the unified process, we unintentionally send a message to families that DCYF does not promote reunification, relational, or cultural permanency. The unified approach promotes dominant culture, actual, and perceived power.

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*The “power” we have over families.*

*A Licensing Division supervisor shared how staff asked them to visit an applicant’s home because the recommended outcome of the unified home study was going to be denial. The applicant was a grandmother who was caring for her toddler-aged grandson. She was single, Black and low income, she had to downsize for financial reasons, so she had a lot of belongings in her small apartment, making it very “full” of stuff, but clean. The grandmother was sharing a bedroom with her grandson, but had taken the time to get donations to personalize the little boy’s space in their shared room. The supervisor visited the home, saw nothing concerning, and observed a thriving child. When the grandmother was told she was being recommended for approval, she began crying. She was afraid her grandson was going to be removed from her care.*

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The unified home study process further perpetuates the power because it does not allow for consistent use of a racial equity and social justice lens. Any process that is one-size-fits-all tends to disproportionately impact BIPOC caregivers. The unified home study process requires applicants to gather and disclose documentation from institutions that have demonstrated historical and systemic oppression, including but not limited to: income verification, medical reports, court records, and marriage and divorce decrees.

By asking for this early on in a case, we are potentially limiting a very important resource our children in care have – kinship caregivers. The racial equity impact of this approach is not small. “Legal permanence alone doesn’t guarantee secure attachments and lifelong relationships. The relational aspects of permanency are critically important and fundamental to overall well-being.” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families (January 5, 2021).

### **Foster Care Application Portal**

In order to meet federal and state requirements and to improve the permanency rates statewide, DCYF will be developing and implementing a Foster Care Provider Portal. The Portal will allow improvements to the state’s foster care licensing system, increasing and diversifying the population of foster families. The Portal will help to streamline the Unified Home Study process, automate existing paper practices, and provide tools for efficient recruitment and retention of foster parents in Washington State. The Portal will also enable the Department to provide a single application source to prospective and existing caregivers. Finally, it would provide the Department, the media, and the Legislature with measurable, quantifiable, and meaningful outcomes.

For updated information on the project and implementation schedule, refer to DCYF’s webpage at <https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/practice/practice-improvement/foster-parent-application-portal/schedule>

### **New Home Study Process Being Developed**

In 2020, DCYF asked the Government Performance Lab to look across kinship placement, licensing, and support processes to identify ways to increase; support available to kinship placements, the proportion of out-of-home placements with kin, and proportion of kin who are licensed. This review found that “the one-size-

fits-all approach to home study slows licensing, and has other repercussion throughout the system” [6sic]. They encouraged a redesign of the home study process utilizing a tiered approach to better serve client needs and better utilize staff capacity.

Licensing Division is restructuring the unified home study into a tiered process that will be called a *Tiered Home Study*. The new tiered home study design was informed by: relational and cultural permanence and data, racial equity, the history of child welfare, and adoption and quality care.

It is designed to put the work where it is most needed at the time it makes the highest impact. This involves consideration of disproportionality, cultural and relational permanency, length of stay (in foster care), differentiation (when to gather additional information and when it’s unnecessary), and overall health, safety, and well-being of children, youth, and families.

There are four tiers to the new tiered home study: Tier One (Safety Assessment – Emergent Placement), Tier Two (Well-Being Assessment), Tier Three (Licensure), Tier Four (Adoption). There are not four home studies; it is a tiered process that will result in the completion of one home study.

**Tier One** is completed primarily by the child’s assigned child welfare worker. It is a brief assessment that ensures basic safety for children and youth in unlicensed kinship placements. **Tier Two** is a well-being assessment. A well-being assessment will be required for all persons who care for children and is inclusive of differentiation. This is the crux of the work and results in the tiered home study report. **Tier Three** adds the requirements of licensure. **Tier Four** adds the legal requirements of adoption.

By dividing all components into specific tiers, the work will be completed in stages. Completion of a well-being assessment early on will have a high impact on ensuring the health, safety, and well-being needs of children and youth. Then, we encourage licensing kinship (relatives and suitable persons, as defined in law). We remove the requirement for completing all three components (assessment, licensing and adoption) at once to allow time for families to absorb the process. Simply separating the licensing and adoption requirements decreases barriers to achieving licensure. This may lead to an increase in guardianships.

The tiers are designed to build on each other. They will allow for customized pathways as well as simultaneous completion. The new home study elevates relational and cultural permanency; however, legal permanency is still vital and will be discussed at every tier.

The tiered approach to the home study will begin once the foster care portal is implemented (projected date of summer of 2022).

### Adoption-Only Home Studies

Prospective adoptive families can participate in the DCYF Licensing Division unified foster and adoptive home study process. Prospective adoptive families who do not wish to become foster licensed can request an adoption-only home study. Limited staff resources and a focus on licensing kinship families for children and

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<sup>6</sup> GPL Support to DCYF WA COVID-19 Response, Opportunities to improve kinship placement, licensing and supports, July 2020

youth currently placed in out-of-home care have caused delays in completing adoption-only home studies, which may wait for several months or longer before the home study is completed. To address this issue, DCYF established contracts with four private agencies who have agreed to facilitate adoption-only home studies for families who are seeking to adopt children within a specified population. This population includes children over the age of six years, sibling groups, and children or youth who are experiencing significant medical, mental health, and behavioral needs.

The implementation of these contracts was delayed due to budget cuts and the necessity of further discussion with labor relations. These conversations were held during the first quarter of 2021 with final agreement between DCYF and labor relations including the following:

- Maximum of 40 private agency adoption-only home studies per calendar year.
- Completion of 35 home studies will prompt additional discussions.
- Private adoption-only home studies will be re-evaluated every year.
- DCYF will ensure quality measures are in place and will track permanency outcomes.

The contracts with the agencies were signed in March 2021 with the first official referral occurring April 8, 2021. Since the start of the contracts, five adoption-only home studies have been completed. An additional four are either in process or waiting for background checks before an official referral to an agency is made.

### **Kinship Caregiver Engagement Unit**

Placing with kin caregivers allows the child to preserve their cultural and relational permanence. Despite being placed with kinship caregivers, there is minimal support for kinship caregivers navigating the requirements to have the kin children placed or remain placed in their home. The 2018 Federal Case Review indicated that lack of timeliness of home studies was a major contributor to delayed permanency in 32 percent of cases. Kinship caregivers do not understand the home study process, the required paperwork, and available resources to support them. Completing the home study is not a priority for kinship caregivers due to the addition of their growing family, the added parental responsibilities, and additional finances to care for the kin children. To address the unique barriers presented by working with kinship providers, a specialized unit was created and piloted to engage and support families during the home study referral.

The Caregiver Engagement Unit (CEU) was piloted in Oct. 1, 2020 in Region 1 and 2 to engage, assist and support kin providers in completing the home study requirements. Kinship caregivers are often not aware of the resources available to them or unaware of the additional financial support should they choose to become foster licensed. With early support and engagement from the CEU specialists, kin caregivers are able to access resources to support their growing family. Early engagement with kin caregivers can yield timely permanency by completing home studies in a timely manner, mitigate any barriers that is identified through the home study process and provide support resources to sustain and prevent multiple placements.

The pilot project is broken down into two parts. The first part is engagement, which involves CEU specialists. The second part is assessment, which involves home study specialists. During a 10-month review of the CEU pilot from October 2020-August 2021, there was a 20%timeliness improvement in Regions 1 and 2. On average, before the pilot, it took 143 days in Region 1 and 146 days in Region 2 to complete the home study.

During the pilot, home studies were completed in 113 days in Region 1 and 124 days in Region 2. Home study completion was accounted from the time of the completed application to completion of the home study. The projected engagement goal for CEU specialists is to engage, assist, and navigate families within 60 days of the home study referral. The pilot project showed that applications are completed by the CEU specialists within 40 days, well below the projected goal. Due to its initial success and the current capacity to onboard additional regions, Region 6 was transitioned to the pilot project during Fall/Winter 2021. It is the goal is to have the Caregiver Engagement Unit specialized statewide within the next couple of years with supported capacity.

## **Meeting the Physical and Behavioral Health Needs of Children and Youth Experiencing Foster Care**

The Foster Well Being (FWB) team and Apple Health Core Connections (AHCC) managed care plan provide physical and behavioral health care coordination for their covered populations. These programs also provide caseworkers and caregivers with the information needed for case planning and the identification of supports and services the child/youth requires to meet their physical and behavioral health care needs.

### **Major Components of Fostering Well-Being (FWB)**

The FWB team provides a range of services to children and youth in out-of-home care, including care coordination of children enrolled in Fee-For-Service Medicaid.

- FWB program specialists and clinical nurse advisors consult caseworkers and caregivers regarding individual health questions and concerns. FWB provides integrated physical and behavioral/mental healthcare coordination for children and youth in out-of-home placement who are not enrolled in AHCC (Non-citizen, tribal affiliated, and tribal custody).
- FWB is available to provide continued assistance to youth ages 18-21 years of age as they transition into Extended Foster Care or adult services.
- Provides consultation to AHCC managed care leadership and care management staff around Medicaid policy and rules.
- Provides clinical input and review of physical and behavioral/mental health-related policies for DCYF.
- Reviews Child Health and Education Tracking (CHET) screens of all initially placed children and youth in DCYF custody to identify medically fragile children or youth and expedite appropriate referrals to AHCC and triage for FWB staff to ensure care coordination begins as soon as possible.
- Serves as a consultant to DCYF licensing staff during:
  - Medically Fragile Group Home (MFGH) initial licensing and comprehensive review processes.
  - Licensing renewal site visits.
  - Fatality reviews.
- Teams with appropriate staff at the HCA on all potential denials for any Medicaid fee-for-service prior authorization requests.
- Five Regional Medical Consultants (RMC) are a vital resource available to caseworkers, caregivers, and local medical providers. The RMCs:
  - Draft Adoption Support “At Risk” medical provider statements that provide information about a child’s potential risk for a diagnosis of a physical, mental, developmental, cognitive, or

emotional disability due to prenatal exposure to toxins, a history of serious abuse, or neglect, or genetic history

- Provide in-depth medical consultation to caseworkers and caregivers regarding diagnoses and medications
- Provide second-level medical consultation to FWB Registered Nurses regarding diagnoses and medications. A specialized Medicaid eligibility unit at HCA partners with FWB, DCYF, and AHCC to send reports to caregivers about the child's immunizations and Medicaid services the child received prior to entering out-of-home placement (for privacy reasons, reports are only mailed to caregivers for children under the age of 13). The reports are mailed to caregivers within three working days of placement notification to HCA.
- The FWB program and specialized Medicaid eligibility unit at HCA mail health education materials to caregivers, including information about recognizing symptoms of trauma and how to support a child or youth who is exposed to trauma.

### Major Components of Apple Health Core Connections (AHCC)

The AHCC managed care plan for foster children was implemented on Apr. 1, 2016. Coordinated Care of Washington, Inc. (CCW) has the AHCC contract and serves approximately 24,000 children, youth, and young adults who are or were involved in the Washington State child welfare system (see the **AHCC Annual Report** for additional information and data about the program).

Children and youth enrolled in AHCC currently receive:

- Fully integrated physical and behavioral health care services and coordination.
- Access to a 24/7 nurse advice line.
- Teladoc – 24/7 access to virtual health care for all children and behavioral health therapists for those 18 and over – via telehealth provider Teladoc.
- Programs to support family planning and healthy pregnancy.
- Healthy Kids Club to engage children 12 and younger to support the development of healthy habits.
- Rewards Program for children and youth in extended foster care, alumni of foster care, and adoption support populations that provides money on a prepaid debit card when certain healthy actions are taken (e.g., getting an annual well-child check).
- Nutrition Security support through Coordinated Care Harvest Bucks™, provides AHCC members with vouchers to purchase fresh, frozen, or canned fruits and vegetables at any Safeway store in Washington.
- Prepaid cell phones (*unlimited texting, 350 minutes, and 3 GB data per month*) for children and youth in extended foster care, alumni of foster care, and adoption support populations with unlimited minutes of access to Coordinated Care and the 24-hour nurse advice line.
- a2A – adolescent to Adult: This program provides resources for the adolescent population that connects them with resources, health education, and care as they transition to adulthood. This service is available for most youth and young adults until age 26.
- Programs in continued development and implementation such as Adoption Success: This program supports adoptive families to coordinate physical and behavioral health care services for children served in the adoption support program until age 18. (Extended coverage to age 21 can be requested if the youth is still in school).

## Recommendations

DCYF's vision is for Washington State's children and youth to grow up safe and healthy –thriving physically, emotionally, and academically –nurtured by family and community. DCYF is responsible for ensuring that children in out-of-home care have a safe and stable home. Whenever possible and appropriate to do so, DCYF seeks to place children with kinship caregivers who are related to or have an existing relationship with the child or the child's family. When a kinship placement is not possible, the child is placed into a licensed foster home. Suppose a child is unable to reunify and needs permanency in the form of guardianship or adoption. In that case, DCYF seeks to place with a caregiver who will preserve the child's heritage, connections, and sibling contact.

In the next year, DCYF is hopeful for the following:

- Enhancing family finding strategies and supporting kinship caregivers through additional supports with the Kinship Caregiver Engagement Unit and Child-Specific Licenses
- Improving the timeliness and completion of adoptions for youth who are legally free with the transition of the WWK model internally and continuation of the Permanency from Day 1 grant strategies.
- Fund additional resources for American Indian/Alaskan Native recruitment and retention of licensed foster parents and kinship caregivers.
- Implement online provider portal to serve licensed foster parents, adoptive families, and kinship caregivers through the home study process.

Working within the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged us all. This includes our children and youth, our parents and families, foster, adoptive, and kinship caregivers, service providers, and staff. As we navigate this new reality, we have learned to adapt and create innovative solutions to stay connected and continue this important work. The impact COVID-19 had is yet to be seen in its entirety, but there is no question that there has been great impact. Through effective leadership, advocacy, and perseverance, DCYF supports its mission, vision, and values in providing support to those most in need throughout the state.