

## Summary

In 2021, the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) partnered with the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption (The Foundation) to continue the Wendy's Wonderful Kids® (WWK) program in Washington state. The program is funded by a grant and legislative proviso that supports dedicated permanency professionals known as recruiters who work to achieve legal permanency through fostering relational connections for children in foster care. Through this fidelity-driven program, these recruiters use a child-focused recruitment model to serve children who have typically experienced more challenges with placement: older children, children with siblings who are also available for adoption, and children with special needs.

The population of children who have been served through WWK since January of 2022 includes:

- Children age 12-13 at the time of a referral.
- Children placed in qualified residential treatment programs.
- Children with past and/or current mental health, behavioral, educational, and medical needs.
- Children with past foster care guardianships and/or adoption finalizations.
- Children who have been in care, on average, for 2,667.5+ days and/or 7.33+ years
- Children who have experienced, on average, at least 16+ placement changes.
- Children, on average, who have experienced at least 6+ temporary situations to include being on the run, hospitalizations, detention, and night-to-night stays including hotel stays.

Through the utilization of the child-focused recruitment model, recruiters are able to support these youth to voice their needs and preferences by helping them explore and strengthen their past, present, and future relationships.



Over the 2024-2025 WWK year, which runs from June 1 to July 30:

- 6,027 relational and legal permanency resources were contacted by recruiters
- 991 of those relational and legal permanency resources were contacted for the first time.
- 87% of children being served by the WWK® program having at least one or more individuals in their lives who are providing the youth with support and on-going connection.
- In addition, 30 children were matched with a relative or with someone known to the child and six children reached legal permanency over the 2024-2025 WWK year.

### Metric report for the report period 1/2022 – 6/2025

Metric	1/2022- 6/2022	7/2022- 6/2023	7/2023- 6/2024	7/2024- 6/2025
<b>Children Added</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Children Matched</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Matches</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Children in pre-adopt</b> (at the end of the period)	0	6	11	15
<b>Children in pre-guardianship</b> (at the end of the period)	0	0	2	3
<b>Children Finalized</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Adoption</b>	0	0	4	2
<b>Guardianship</b>	0	0	0	3
<b>Reunification</b>	0	2	0	1
<b>Youth Served</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>*PARs Identified</b>	<b>4,740</b>	<b>8,091</b>	<b>4,500</b>	<b>3,420</b>
<b>% known</b>	40%	34%	39%	32%
<b>% related</b>	43%	55%	59%	65%
<b>PARs Contacted</b>	<b>286</b>	<b>2,913</b>	<b>5,226</b>	<b>6,027</b>
<b>% known</b>	64%	24%	7%	12%
<b>% related</b>	35%	74%	92%	86%

\*PARs: Potential Adoptive Resources

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## Highlights

- In Region 1, the recruiter was assigned a case in December 2023. The youth entered care in 2019 at six years old. After the youth had spent two years in a foster home, their foster mother was considering permanency but had not made a clear commitment. The recruiter explored additional supports for the youth, including his biological mother, with whom he had three visits per year.

The recruiter engaged the team in active recruitment for relational permanency, which led to connections with both a paternal relative, who began writing letters, and a maternal relative, who requested more information about the youth. The maternal relatives revealed they were previously unaware that the youth remained in care. While they had not been an option in the past, their circumstances had changed as their biological children were now grown. This allowed them to consider building a relationship and potentially becoming a permanent resource. The family began with short visits, which progressed to overnight stays and family trips to meet extended relatives.

Today, at the age of 12, the youth is placed with his maternal family members and is developing strong familial relationships with additional extended family members, all of which began with a focus on relational permanency.

- In Region 2, a recruiter was assigned a case in July 2022 involving a youth who entered care in 2020 at six years old. The recruiter began by exploring relative connections, focusing on those who had previously cared for one of the youth's siblings. Although this initial option was not possible due to the family's circumstances, the recruiter persisted in seeking relatives and eventually connected with a paternal relative in Alaska.

The recruiter supported the family and caseworker with background checks as the family initiated the ICPC process in their home state. The paternal relatives collaborated with the youth's foster placement to build a relationship through regular virtual meetings. The recruiter also helped coordinate visits to Washington, allowing the family to strengthen their bond with the youth in his familiar environment. Once the ICPC was finalized and approved, the recruiter accompanied the youth on a trip to Alaska, giving him a chance to experience his new home with a familiar connection. During this transition, the team worked together to prepare the youth for the placement change

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and permanency in a developmentally appropriate way.

Afterward, the youth returned to Washington and maintained his connection with his Alaska relatives. He successfully completed the school year and then celebrated an official placement with the Alaska family in October 2024. Today, after five years of foster care, he remains happily placed with his relatives who are all looking forward to their finalization date.

- In Region 3, a specialized recruiter was assigned to a youth in February 2022. At the initial meeting, it was noted that the youth had a strong bond with his grandmother, though she was not a permanent option at that time. The recruiter then contacted other relatives identified by the relative search unit, several of whom expressed interest in supporting the youth. These relatives contributed to the youth's family history and life book, and the recruiter maintained ongoing communication to support these connections.

As a result, the youth received letters and family photos. Throughout this process, his grandmother remained a consistent presence, with frequent visits and extended stays. Their connection was clearly significant. After ongoing discussions and team support, the grandmother felt prepared to meet the youth's needs. The 2024-2025 reporting period concluded with a clear plan to move toward placement, with a date set for the start of the new 2025-2026 reporting period.

- In Region 4, a specialized recruiter was assigned to a youth in March 2022. During this time, the youth had intermittent contact with his biological mother. In July 2023, a new specialized recruiter was assigned to the case. The youth's primary worker informed the recruiter that the youth was having supervised video calls with his biological mother, which the primary worker and the youth attorney assisted with. The biological mother lived out of state in the upper Midwest. This was a barrier to further developing their relationship and assessing who the biological mother was today.

Given this information, the specialized recruiter assisted the primary worker in filling out paperwork for the foster care assessment program (FCAP). This paperwork allowed an outside party to evaluate the youth's biological mother to see if reinstatement of her rights should be pursued. The assessment concluded with the recommendation that parental rights should be reinstated. The specialized recruiter partnered with the team to ensure the mother could participate fully in this process. At times, this included using

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the specialized recruiter's work phone to FaceTime the youth's mother and then holding the phone to the screen during a Zoom meeting due to technology accessibility. The recruiter further assisted the family in completing the out-of-state background check process.

In November 2024, the youth's biological mother and family were able to come to Washington to reunite in person for the first time in several years. The youth was also able to meet his younger brother for the first time. In December 2024, the judge ruled that the youth could go on an extended visit out of state to be with his family. The specialized recruiter flew the youth out to his mother and assisted in getting the family re-settled. The youth turned 18 years old in February 2025, and although there was not enough time to fully evaluate the reinstatement of parental rights, this youth was able to reconnect with his direct family line and culture.

- In Region 6, a specialized recruiter was assigned a case in 2023 for a youth who had previously been adopted through foster care. This youth, however, came back into care in 2020 at 11 years old due to allegations in the home. The adoptive parents' rights were eventually terminated.

When this youth was referred to the WWK program, he never thought he would be able to reintegrate into a family setting again. He struggled with trust and anticipated staying in a group care setting until he was 18. He had an indifference to permanency but was still open to talking about connections. However, through building a solid foundation of trust and connection, he started to share with his specialized recruiter about the important people in his life. This included teachers, friends, and previous placement case managers. This youth also shared the name of his ex-girlfriend, who he had maintained a friendship with. He also wanted to maintain a relationship with her parents.

The specialized recruiter was able to connect with his friend's parents, who noted they had been having conversations about caring for this youth and would like to be a support to him. The team assisted the family in working through the process to become a support and an eventual placement of this youth. The youth very slowly began to open up to permanency and insisted on having conversations with the parents and their biological children about being adopted prior to agreeing to move forward with it. This process took time but was very thoughtfully done through the youth's voice and the support of his team. Now, at the age of 17, he is anticipated to be adopted at the beginning of the new reporting period.

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## Barriers

Coverage gaps across regions, remain a challenge. These coverage gaps limit active recruitment and hind match and permanency goals.

Barriers to permanency, such as delays in service provision, financial support, legal approvals, and interstate processes, also continue to impede progress. These barriers often requiring months to convene a youth's team and hold shared planning meetings.

However, specialized recruiters have excelled in advocating and enlisting multidisciplinary support, fostering better referrals and overall program efficacy. Ongoing education and regional support were identified as priorities for the upcoming period to sustain momentum and achieve continued improved outcomes.

Despite these obstacles, the program has strengthened partnerships through case reviews, closures of inappropriate referrals, and a shift away from non-child-focused methods, leading to increased matches and anticipated growth in permanency.

## Conclusion

DCYF's partnership with the Wendy's Wonderful Kids program has emphasized education, process improvements, and collaboration to enhance child-focused recruitment and permanency outcomes. Key efforts include statewide and region-specific trainings to grow understanding about the child-focused recruitment model and the role of recruiters, alongside a revised referral processes featuring initial meetings that clarify responsibilities and reduce confusion.

Overall, during the 2024-2025 reporting period, the specialized recruiters implementing the Wendy's Wonderful Kids program have made significant strides in supporting the permanency goals for children in foster care across Washington state. Of note, each child who has been matched or reached legal permanency during the reporting period, started with relational permanency being established first.

Building emotional connections and a support network is proven to instill a sense of belonging, trust, and understanding in the lives of youth in foster care. In addition, the revised referral process and ongoing training have allowed the WWK program to maintain fidelity to the child-focused recruitment model, leading to improved outcomes despite the various barriers faced. In addition, collaborative efforts with the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and the development of educational resources continue to strengthen the program.

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