

Dear David;

I'm writing to provide some context and structure to this year's budget requests. This being a supplemental year and a short session, I'm writing a shorter letter than I did last year.

We had the most successful change of initials in state history, and perhaps in the history of the world. (Prince had a symbol, not new initials.) Now comes the hard work of changing the performance of the agency and making significant improvements in the lives of children and their families in Washington, and particularly those born far from opportunity.

Our top priority ask is for a one-time purchase of networking hardware that will allow us to have a separate network from DSHS in the large number of buildings we share across the state. This is commodity hardware, and installing it will allow us to manage the security of our network, allow file sharing between employees in the department, and make a number of upgrades that will reduce the number of staff doing mundane activities, freeing them to do the important work of the agency. We will finally be able to make use of cloud technology, including Office 365 licenses we have been funding for several years, but unable to use.

The growing number of hotel and office stays is one of the key concerns that drove the creation of the agency and that is putting both our staff and the children we serve at risk. This is when our staff do not have a viable placement for a particular child and have to staff an overnight stay in a hotel, in the office, or in one-night placements that are expensive and not good for the children. These youth have significant behavioral health problems and our offices are not set up to safely meet their complex needs. The solutions are complex and multi-faceted. Your office is working with us on a proposal that will cover some cross-agency placement issues, and I would expect this DP to be updated with the result of that work in the near future.

In the past few years, the Legislature has expanded the population the Juvenile Rehabilitation program must serve. A court case this summer expanded the population significantly, and their prospective arrival is quite soon. We cannot safely serve these young adults without adequate and well-supported staff, and young people in their early twenties need very different programming than teenagers do. The goal is to provide young adults with a therapeutic, constructive environment designed to support changing their life trajectory so that they do not enter our corrections system.

Our initial look at the performance of the agency raises concerns about the average length of stay of a child in the dependency system. According to a basic look at the data states report to the federal government dependent children in Washington stay in foster care for longer than in all but a handful of states, and this is one of the key measures we propose to take on in the next year. We have a handful of proposals to address parts of this problem:

1. There are about 1600 children who are eligible to be adopted, in the placement we expect to adopt them, and who are waiting for a home study to complete the process. Unfortunately, our group that does these is understaffed for the volume they are being required to do, and we have a growing backlog. We propose two decision packages to address this.

- Instead of just hiring additional home study workers we are proposing a process improvement. In conjunction with the foster parent application portal approved last year (and that we expect to deploy next summer,) we want to split the work into separate processes and hire staff to focus on helping collect the data needed for completion of home studies. The application portal will allow us to quickly collect all necessary paperwork from families, particularly kin. The change in work process will allow complete information to be collected and to move completed applications more quickly, as opposed to having completed applications sit in the same line with incomplete applications. We believe this will significantly speed up the processing of home studies, which are federally required.
 - We also have a growing backlog handling administrative appeals in complex background check cases. Often the best placement for a child has an issue in their background check that requires a judgment call, which requires significant research to ensure a safe placement for the child. Speeding this up will fix a critical blockage.
2. Another key process flow block is the rate of “continuances” in dependency court, particularly in our largest counties and counties where we are using contract assistant attorneys general instead of dedicated employees. Continuances delay the resolution of a case, often by as much as six months at a time – a lifetime in the life of a young child.
- The top reason for these continuances is that the department has not adequately and timely provided “services” to the birth family. There can be many of these, but almost all cases require frequent visits between the child and his or her birth family. Our rate structure is inadequate to secure the contractor base that is the least costly way to provide court-ordered visits, and we propose a flexible increase so we can find the best structure to make this work, plus some technology work to make the process more effective.
 - We also suffer with very high caseloads among our assistant attorneys general. These are often twice as high as the caseload of the defense attorneys, resulting in us not being prepared and needing to ask for a continuance. We propose funding the AG to allow us to get to the high end of the recommended range nationally. DCYF also recommends reviewing caseload and workload metrics across all case representation including AG, parent’s representation, and attorneys representing children.

Now that we have finished the formal part of the agency transition we have identified a few places where the transition math did not provide us with adequate back office staff. In many cases we do not have staff that enable us to meet specific requirements in state or federal law, particularly in human resources and risk management. Our package proposes some modest adjustments to staffing levels.

We also have included a number of small investments to leverage significant improvements in our capacity to respond to Legislative requests.

1. Tribal Investments
2. Intake Efficiencies
3. ECEAP Special Needs Rates

4. Adolescent Programs
5. WCCC Rate Restructure

We also have continuing issues in managing safe caseloads in both child welfare and juvenile rehabilitation. Some of these issues are covered with the forecast, but key parts of our ability to serve children and their families are not forecasted.

1. Safe & Therapeutic Environments
2. Reducing CFWS Caseloads

A stakeholder group working through our proposed regulations increasing the licensing qualifications of childcare teachers made recommendations for a community-based set of classes and evaluations, in addition to the program already offered by the community college system. We made significant changes to the proposed regulations as a result of the feedback we received, including allowing providers with 7 years of experience who are current on the annual professional development requirements to qualify with no additional training. This package funds the alternative community-based system.

Finally, the agency followed law created in the early start act and aligned our childcare licensing standards in a very collaborative negotiation process with SEIU 925 and other stakeholders. We agreed with the union to put forward a proposal to cover some costs their members may experience in adopting these aligned rules. We did so last year, but it was not funded. We are again submitting this request with some revisions.

The law that created the agency required us to implement “performance-based contracts” for all client service contracts. This is somewhere close to a billion dollars annually, and almost 1000 individual contracts. Over the past year we have learned what this means. To do it responsibly and to get the value we get from tying payment to results requires analytical staff. We were able to get a significant contribution from our philanthropic partners who are interested in this work, but like all private-sector participation in our work it comes with deadlines. We have transformed the first tranche of contracts, but to continue to support this work we need some analytical talent applied to the problem. This package also proposes some additions to our ability to perform continuous quality improvement work.

Our enabling statute also requires a level of data analysis and publication that we find difficult to do with our current infrastructure. We are proposing a modest investment in building a data warehouse that would be cloud-based and would have access to more modern analytical tools. Managing this is complex.

Please feel free to call. Your staff have contacts in our budget shop that should be able to address any questions.

Sincerely,

