

Chair Gelser and Committee Members,

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration and discussion this afternoon of SB 517.

I was pleased to hear testimony from DHS that it believes its existing practices, plus practices already in the process of being implemented, meet the requirements of SB 517. As such, there should be no fiscal impact for the legislature to codify these current and important practices to ensure they continue beyond any future management changes.

I urge the committee to pass SB 517. A copy of the full testimony I presented is below.

Thank you,
Steve Elzinga

I'm here to support Senate Bill 517 based on my experiences when my wife and I served as foster parents. This topic is particularly close to my heart.

Thank you to Senator Girod for introducing this idea, to Chair Gelser for scheduling this hearing, and also to this committee for thoughtful consideration of this and other potential small improvements to help vulnerable kids.

We all know that foster care is hard. Kids and bio parents are traumatized. Foster parents are not sufficiently supported. Case workers are overworked. The courts are backlogged. The system is inefficient and underfunded.

The goal of this bill is to help shorten times that kids are in the foster care system, which can reduce the trauma they experience and decrease funding strains.

Two foster kids lived with us for longer terms. I am using intentionally impersonal language today to protect their privacy, but please know that I believe both kids are very special and unique individuals. They both still hold a piece of my very imperfect foster father's heart.

One of our foster kids was reunited with a bio parent; another was adopted by another family. These were the right outcomes, but both sadly took far too long.

SB 517 is a simple concept to fill a hole we observed during these experiences. Whenever DHS removes a child from their parents, DHS should promptly provide a clear and concise summary in plain, non-legal language of why the child was removed and what remedial steps the parent must take to ensure safety so the child can be returned.

Unfortunately, we observed that this does not always occur, and bio parents are sometimes so traumatized from their child being removed that they have difficulty processing what is occurring, especially when it is occurring in difficult-to-understand legalese.

We also observed that DHS sometimes moves the goalposts on reunification requirements. While occasionally this is necessary, most of the time it shouldn't be. For example, one case worker told us that the only reason they were not reuniting our foster child with their bio parent and siblings at that time was that the parent and siblings had inadequate housing. However, they didn't see a reason to remove our foster kid's siblings from the bio parent's very same supposedly inadequate housing situation. This appeared to us to be inherently contradictory—if the housing was unsafe, then why was DHS allowing siblings to remain in that situation? If the housing was safe, however, as we suspected, then why was DHS using that as an excuse to delay reunification?

State law rightly assumes that most of the time the best interest of a foster child is to be reunited with their bio parent as quickly as possible once the reasons requiring removal are addressed to ensure safety. This bill tries to help speed that process. Also, by requiring DHS to put needed remedial steps in writing, it hopefully helps to minimize instances of DHS moving the reunification goalposts unnecessarily.

Many others have more foster care experience than I do, so I fully recognize that there may be ways to improve this bill that I am not aware of based on my own experiences. However, there is a very real need here that this bill attempts to help fill.

Every kid in foster care enters the system from a tragic situation, but there is always hope. This bill endeavors to increase that hope ever so slightly.