



# Parent Navigators and Dependency Support

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## Final Report

### 2024 Report to the Legislature

*As required by [Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5950, Sec. 223\(2\)\(e\), 2024](#)*

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# Creating Pathways for Family Reunification

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## Legislative Directive

*“\$300,000 of the general fund—state appropriation for fiscal year 2024 and \$320,000 of the general fund - state appropriation for fiscal year 2025 are provided solely for continuing two contracted parent navigator positions. One parent navigator must be located at the Washington correction center for women and one parent navigator position must be located at the Airway Heights corrections center or another state correctional facility that houses incarcerated male individuals and is selected by the department of corrections as a more suitable fit for a parent navigator. The parent navigators must have lived experience in navigating the child welfare system. The parent navigators must provide guidance and support to incarcerated individuals towards family reunification including, but not limited to, how to access services, navigating the court system, assisting with guardianship arrangements, and facilitating visitation with their children. The goal of the parent navigator program is to assist incarcerated parents involved in dependency or child welfare cases to maintain connections with their children and to assist these individuals in successfully transitioning and reuniting with their families upon release from incarceration. As part of the parent navigation program, the department of corrections must also review and provide a report to the legislature on the effectiveness of the program that includes the number of incarcerated individuals that received assistance from the parent navigators and the type of assistance the incarcerated individuals received, and that tracked the outcome of the parenting navigator program. A final report must be submitted to the legislature by September 1, 2024. Of the amounts provided in this subsection, \$20,000 of the general fund—state appropriation for fiscal year 2024 is provided solely for the department's review and report on the effectiveness of the parent navigator program.”*

## Executive Summary

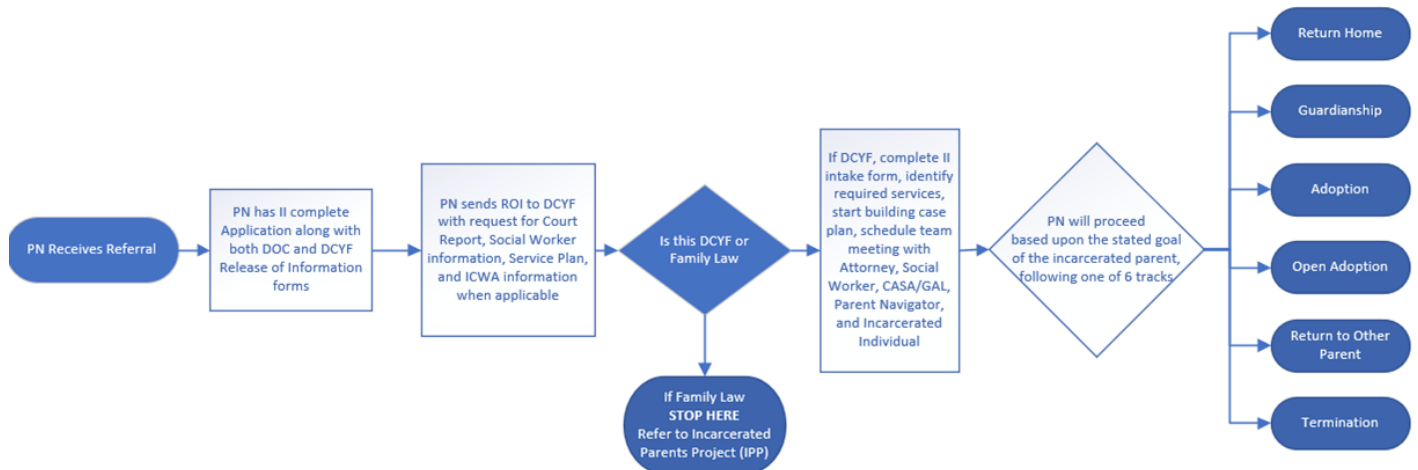
In May 2022, the Department of Corrections (DOC) received the opportunity to launch a new program utilizing parent navigators with “lived experience” to work with incarcerated parents who have open child dependency cases under a budget proviso within [ESSB 5693\(223\)\(6\)\(m\)](#). Two positions have been filled and are funded through 2025: one parent navigator assigned to the Washington Corrections Center for Women (WCCW), and the second parent navigator assigned to Airway Heights Corrections Center (AHCC).

A parent navigator works collaboratively with the incarcerated parent, department staff, Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), and other agencies to ensure the incarcerated parent is able to actively participate in the dependency process and receive necessary services. Parent navigators educate external stakeholders on appropriate processes and can help facilitate staffing for hearings, required services, and completing visitation applications. Parent navigators also serve as a liaison when there is paperwork or documentation needed which can minimize procedural delays and missed deadlines that prevent an incarcerated parent from being successful in their reunification journey. Reunification may take months to years after an incarcerated parent is released, however through their work with a parent navigator they are able to minimize this timeline and begin making impactful steps from the moment they start their parent navigator partnership.

The parent navigators work directly with incarcerated parents to identify their own personal goals for their reunification journey and work to provide support to help them succeed and achieve these goals. Through this opportunity, parent navigators are encouraging participation in parenting and other family-friendly programs.

DOC continues to develop this program by collaborating with external partners, such as DCYF, to identify and reduce barriers and find pathways to assist incarcerated parents in achieving their parenting goals.

## FAMILY REUNIFICATION PROGRAM PARENT NAVIGATOR INTAKE PROCESS



## 2023 – 2024 Updates

Though a grant was not received from the Department of Justice (DOJ) to support the funding of a third parent navigator position at the men’s reception facility, the department continues to strategize ways to build pathways to identify parents with open dependency cases upon entry into DOC. Being able to identify at reception that an individual has open dependency actions will allow for proactive approaches by parent navigators to support the incarcerated individuals and their child(ren) upon being placed at their parent facilities.

The Family Services Unit has also prioritized finalizing a Memorandum of Understanding with DCYF to expedite and verify status of dependency cases, make connections with and assign DCYF case managers, and to obtain information regarding current case plan requirements, and upcoming hearings or shared meetings. This agreement is in the finalization stages and will improve access to information and processing time.

## Program Opportunities

Prior to the navigator positions being filled, it was a challenge for DOC to coordinate and facilitate court or DCYF-required services to the incarcerated parents and their children. Now, once an incarcerated individual has established a partnership with the parent navigator, the navigator can work to facilitate and ensure access to incarcerated parents for completing parenting and self-learning requirements set by the courts or DCYF. As the program has developed, the processes and partnerships needed to provide services are strengthening, providing an opportunity to provide more consistent opportunity to those working with parent navigators.

Program opportunities include but are not limited to:

Dependency 101, provided by the Parent Navigator – All parents with an active dependency case complete the Dependency 101 class. Dependency 101 provides incarcerated individuals with a valuable opportunity to learn about the dependency process. This knowledge is essential for achieving

their desired goal of reunification or guardianship. The class features personal experiences shared by the parent navigator and a parent ally, both of whom have firsthand knowledge of incarceration and navigating the dependency process. They emphasize that reunification and life transformation are achievable when individuals make positive choices.

Domestic Violence Classes: Domestic Violence classes are often a requirement of the courts or a legal order in Washington state. Qualifying participants may participate in a DCYF-contracted provider class which is held virtually. (Note: Classes do not consist of other students from outside of DOC).

Assessments – Chemical Dependency, Mental Health, and other assessments are often required by the courts and/or DCYF. Parent Navigators may assist external partners in conducting assessments when DCYF determines it is appropriate and will help to further the success of the incarcerated individual.

Planning meetings – Through DOC’s partnership with DCYF, parent navigators help to encourage involvement in all DCYF shared planning meetings. Incarcerated individuals who participate will help develop family case plans to eliminate safety threats, create permanency goals for their child and make a plan to visit with their child. There are multiple types of meetings in which involvement is recommended. The most frequent types of meetings include Family Team Decision Making (FTDM) and Permanency Planning. These meetings are a great time to present views, determine what an incarcerated individual believes needs to change and what support is needed to make these changes happen.

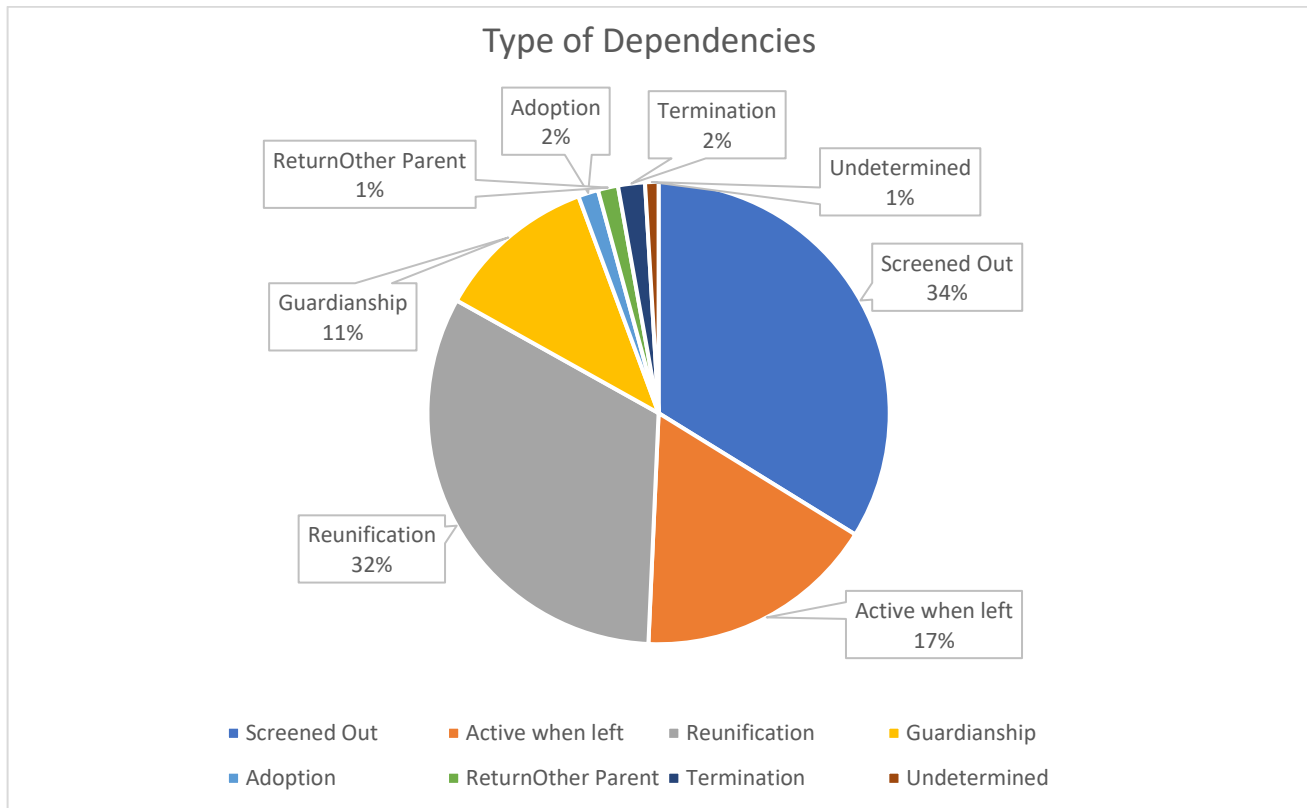
Counseling/Therapy – This is provided by a DCYF-contracted provider. The incarcerated parent may be required to attend counseling and/or therapy that supports their family reunification journey. Therapy may be 1:1 or may include family and community members that assist with building strength in relationships and self-identity that may have been lost over time.

Parenting Programs – Parenting programs must meet the requirements set forth by DCYF. These are required by DCYF or the courts and are paid for by DCYF.

- **Incredible Years**: A parent training program that focuses on strengthening the parenting skills. It is made up of five levels that build on one another. Provider is trained in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and provides strengths-based approaches using system's theory and motivational interviewing.

Anger management – DCYF identifies the provider to facilitate these courses and through partnership with DOC, the parent navigator works with the provider to facilitate and ensure access to the class for the incarcerated parent.

## Program Data



**Screened Out:** Parent Navigator researched and found that there was no active dependency case, and the majority are instead family law matters. A referral is made to Family Law.

**Adoption/OCA:** Adoption - parent can relinquish rights and no communication agreement or Open Communication Adoption (OCA) whereas incarcerated parent may have ongoing communication with child, but they lose parental rights.

**Reunification:** The stated goal of parent is to reunite with their child.

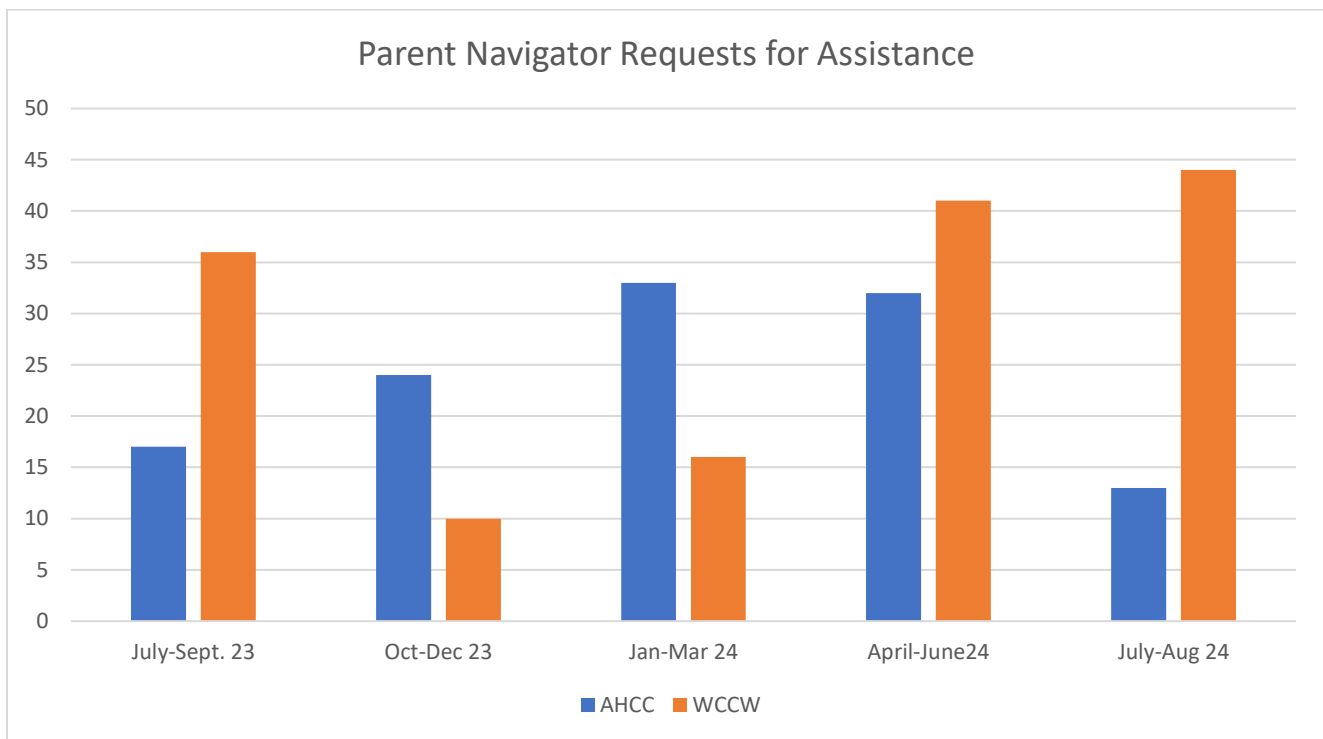
**Termination:** The incarcerated individual went to trial to fight for rights and ended up losing their parental rights.

**Guardianship:** Stated goal of parent is to agree to a guardianship with a specific person, parental rights stay intact.

**Undetermined:** Dependency not yet confirmed, parentage not yet confirmed, etc.

**Return to other Parent:** Child goes to other parent, parental rights intact.

**Active When Left:** The parent navigator worked actively with the incarcerated parent while they were at the facility and continued to work with the parent through their release or transfer to another facility to best support the parent's success.



## Community-Based and Nonprofit Partnerships

In addition to establishing a strong working relationship with DCYF, the parent navigators have also cultivated several influential relationships with community partners. These partnerships are crucial in identifying and overcoming barriers ensuring that incarcerated parents receive the best possible support throughout their reunification journey.

Family Reunification Committee – The Family Reunification Advisory Committee (FRAC) is composed of esteemed community stakeholders with expertise in child welfare in Washington state, and many were involved in writing the legislative proviso. The committee’s primary goal is to identify and address barriers ensuring that incarcerated parents with open dependency cases have access to necessary resources that are in line with the proviso’s intent. Members offer insights from their respective agencies by contributing to the development of effective strategies and minimizing the challenges faced by incarcerated parents. This committee meets every month and consists of members from:

- Washington State Department of Corrections Men’s Prison Division, Women’s Prison Division, Visitation, Behavioral Health, Legal Services, Reentry, Person-Centered Services, and Leadership from AHCC and WCCW
- Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families
- Washington State Office of Public Defense
- Washington State Office of Family and Children Ombuds
- Individuals with lived experience
- Washington State Department of Social and Health Services – Fatherhood Initiative
- Washington Association of Child Advocate Programs
- Washington Defender Association

- Partners for our Children

In addition to the work being conducted through the FRAC, DOC parent navigators continue to build strong relationships and networks with others who have a vested interest in children impacted by incarceration:

Children of Incarcerated Parents (CoIP): The Parent Navigators participate in this diverse group to keep current on changes in laws, learn best practices, and help to identify and overcome barriers. This group meets once a month and is chaired by the Office of Public Defense.

Amara: This group recommends referrals for the Family Connections Program to help parents have healthy relationships with their children's care takers and be an active participant in their lives while incarcerated. A DCYF contractor is responsible for this group and only meets when DOC is requested to assist with DCYF cases.

The Fatherhood Council: the Washington Fatherhood Council is a collaborative group of more than 35 state and local providers, academics, and fathers with lived expertise. Their goal is to reduce poverty and inequality through increased fatherhood access and belonging. The council meets once a month and is chaired by the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS).

DADS: Developing Advocacy for Dads (DADS) is a collaborative initiative involving numerous professionals and both private and public agencies in Spokane County. These partners work together to provide and develop services for fathers and men in fathering roles who co-parent children with someone who is incarcerated. To bridge the service gap for men and fathers, DADS offers community education and training to help agencies become "father-friendly" and assist in creating essential programs that support fathers. This effort aims to strengthen the lives of children, adults, and the broader community. Research shows that children with the loving involvement of a father have significantly better outcomes in all areas of life. Additionally, fathers who are actively and lovingly engaged with their children experience better outcomes in their own lives.

## Continuing Pathways for Family Reunification

Incarceration presents many challenges when it comes to meeting the parental rights for those who are incarcerated with an active child welfare case. These challenges include the inability to attend appointments with DSHS, DCYF, and internal meetings with Parent Navigators, or court hearings, receive telephone calls, or participate in DCYF-approved visitation. These barriers prevent incarcerated parents from exercising their parental rights and participating in the dependency process.

Before the establishment of the parent navigator positions, parents often missed hearings due to a lack of process knowledge and advance notice. Parents also were unable to receive necessary services, such as collaboration with DCYF, attorneys, courts, hearings, domestic violence assessments, and arrange services for dependency cases. Now, due to the implementation of parent navigators, parents at WCCW and AHCC have the opportunity to be more actively engaged with their cases. This is evidenced by increased attendance with dependency cases. Parent navigators capture participation in these programs to track successful outcomes working with DCYF and partner agencies. The need to expand these services to all facilities is evident and will positively support family reunification journeys, which is a key factor in lowering recidivism rates in Washington state.



## Testimonials

*"I've had a CPS case for 9 years. It was going nowhere despite my best efforts. My attorney, case worker, and family told me I should just adopt out my son. I couldn't navigate the CPS system and I didn't know how to communicate with the court and other professionals on my case. Then Brenda Lopez came. I took her Parenting Inside Out class and signed up for her Family Reunification Program and everything turned around. Her knowledge and experience and advice helped me gain the tools I needed to be a better parent and communicate effectively with the professionals on my case. Yesterday, I saw my son for the first time in 9 years. This wouldn't have happened without Brenda's support. Her position here is extremely important because women shouldn't lose their children just because they are incarcerated. They should be given the chance to better themselves, address their issues, and reunify with their children. The Family Reunification Program gives hope to the hopeless and keeps incarcerated individuals from falling back into destructive behaviors when they are released. Thank you for your time and for creating this program."*

-Incarcerated Individual at WCCW

*"I was on a disruptive path ready to fight my roommate the day I met you. You told me I could choose to fight her and lose everything, or I could make the choice to let it go, but the choice is mine. Your words pierced straight through my negative thoughts and made me rethink the path I was headed down. I came back to my living unit and pulled my roommate aside and apologized to her. You have helped me see that there is more to life than the life I have been living. Since meeting you I believe there are people on my side rooting for me and my sobriety and advocating for me to go be the amazing mother I know I can be. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."*

-Incarcerated Individual at WCCW