



**Washington State Auditor's Office**

---

**Troy Kelley**

Independence • Respect • Integrity

# **Experiences and Perspectives of Washington Families who Adopted Children from Foster Care**

Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee

February 20, 2014

**Chuck Pfeil, CPA, Director of Performance Audit**

**Nancy Dufoe, Principal Performance Auditor**

# Children adopted from foster care

## Many children adopted from foster care

- Were victims of abuse and neglect
- Have higher rates of physical health problems
- More likely to have emotional and behavioral problems
- At risk of or diagnosed with a disability
- Struggle in school and receive special education services

# Adoption Support Program

- Federal Adoption Support Program helps parents overcome financial barriers to adopting children from foster care
- Federally required benefits are monthly support payments, one-time costs, Medicaid coverage for adopted child
- Washington also provides funding for individual counseling for child and limited training for parents

*\$94 million spent to help more than 9,000 Washington families raising 14,000 children in 2012*

# Why we did the audit

- Research shows some families need more help
  - Some parents have trouble finding services they need
  - Lack of services can cause problems if the child is already struggling to overcome the effects of abuse and neglect
- Researchers recommend states consider providing an array of post-adoption services
- Washington piloted a program in 2005, but it was eliminated a few years later

# Audit questions

1. To what extent are the service needs of families who adopted from Washington's foster care system being met?
2. What are parents' experiences working with Department of Social and Health Services' Children's Administration to negotiate their benefits?
3. What can we learn from other states' programs that can help improve services for families in Washington?

# Post Adoption Services Survey



## The Experiences & Perspectives of Washington Families

# Survey of adoptive families' service needs

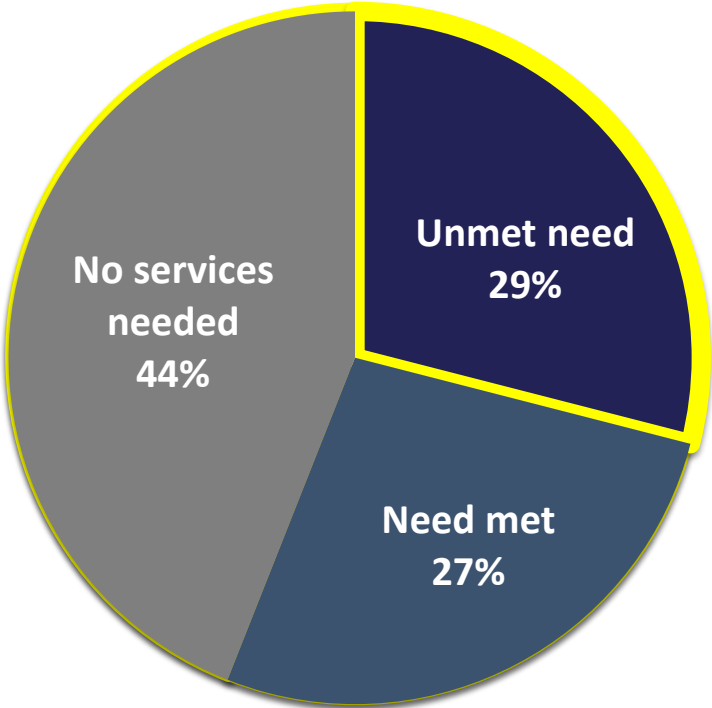
## Did they need the service?

- ✓ Individual counseling
- ✓ Family counseling
- ✓ Support groups
- ✓ Specialized supervision
- ✓ Crisis intervention
- ✓ Residential care

- Were they able to access the service?
- Was the service beneficial?
- What challenges did they face trying to get the service?

# What we found

**Most families needs are met, but some can't access needed services**



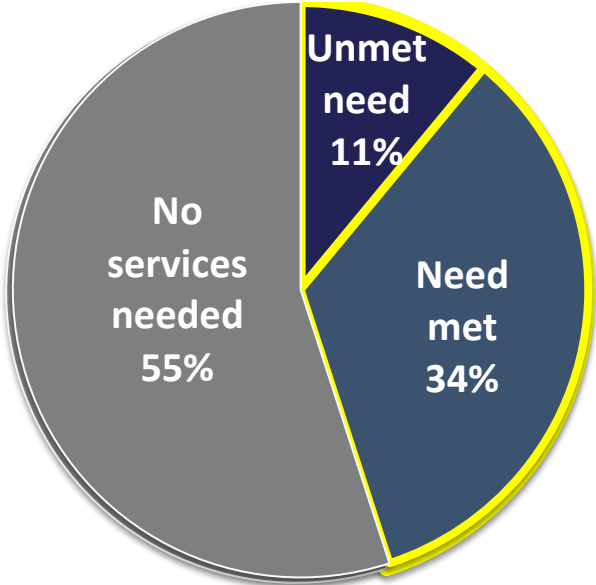


# What we found

## Needs and access vary by service

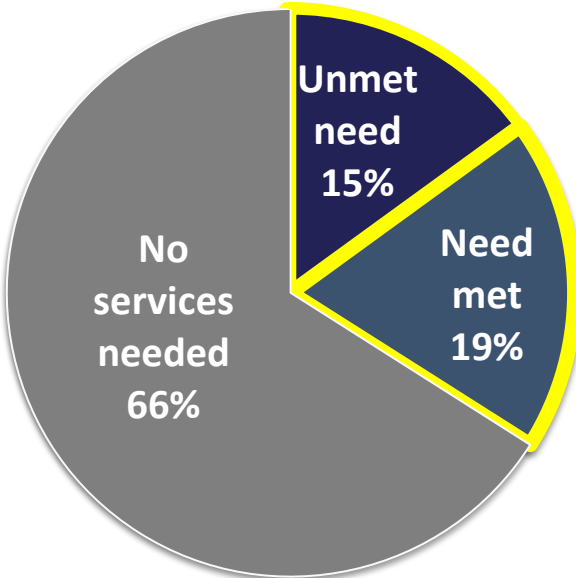
### Individual counseling

*Most needed and easiest to access*



### Family counseling

*Second most needed, but greatest unmet need*

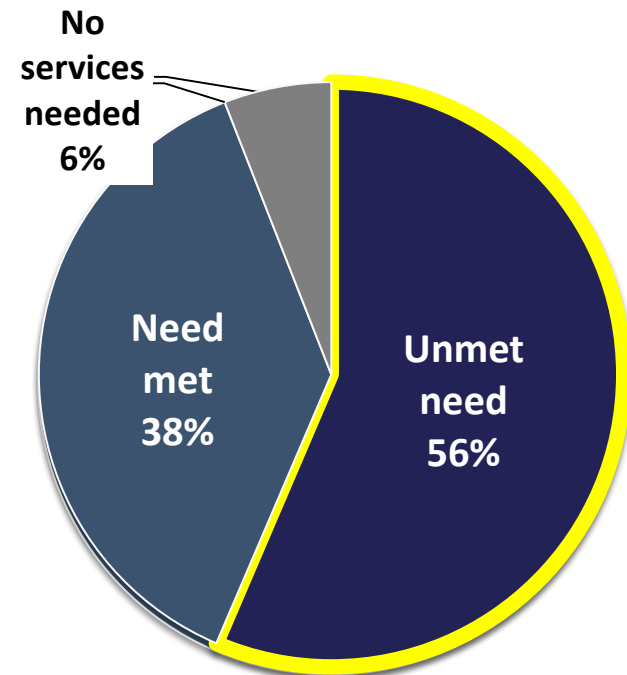


# What we found

## Biggest service gaps: children with the greatest need

- 16% of parents are raising children with a diagnosed disability that severely impacts their lives
- Families typically needed three services compared to one service needed by other children in the survey

*Results represent 16% of families*



# What we found

## Parents have difficulty finding information

- Almost half had difficulty finding information on how to best care for their child
- Families with the greatest need (16%) had a harder time finding information
- Other state surveys also found that families needed information on services
- Adoption Support staff try to help, but program does not have a formal information and referral component

*“It would be really great if information on all services available for adopted children was on a website and readily available.”*

*- Parent response*

# Parents' experiences negotiating their benefits

- More than half gave poor or fair ratings when asked whether program staff gave adequate consideration of their child's needs and the family's circumstances
- Frustration may be due in part to different practices around the state
- 2012 Legislature directed DSHS to establish a central unit
- Children's Administration staff now assigned to a central manager and are developing consistent practices

# Common practices in eight other states

- All states provide services designed for the small number of families caring for children with significant needs
- All provide information and referral services
- All contract with nonprofit organizations to provide some services
- Seven use federal money to help pay for these additional services

Washington does not provide these services or follow these practices

## ***We selected eight states***

- *Alabama*
- *Georgia*
- *Illinois*
- *Indiana*
- *Massachusetts*
- *North Carolina*
- *Oregon*
- *Tennessee*

***to evaluate for leading practices***

# Recommendations

The Department of Social and Health Services:

- Develop a plan for enhancing post-adoption services for families adopting foster children. The plan should address:
  - ❑ Services for children whose disabilities significantly affect their lives
  - ❑ Information on available services
- Submit the plan to the Governor and the Legislature by January 1, 2015
- Reach out to parents one year after the DSHS finishes centralizing the program and report the results of its analysis

# Contacts

**Troy Kelley**

State Auditor

(360) 902-0360

[Troy.Kelley@sao.wa.gov](mailto:Troy.Kelley@sao.wa.gov)

**Chuck Pfeil, CPA**

Director of Performance Audit,

(360) 902-0366

[Chuck.Pfeil@sao.wa.gov](mailto:Chuck.Pfeil@sao.wa.gov)

**Nancy Dufoe**

Principal Performance Auditor

(360) 725-9729

[Nancy.Dufoe@sao.wa.gov](mailto:Nancy.Dufoe@sao.wa.gov)

**Website:** [www.sao.wa.gov](http://www.sao.wa.gov)