

# THE POWER OF PREVENTION: INSIDE THREE PRE-FILING LEGAL REPRESENTATION PROGRAMS

Children's Justice Conference  
May 2026



WHO IS HERE TODAY?





ARE YOU FAMILIAR WITH PREVENTION  
WORK?



## THE PROBLEM

- Preventable removals and family separations
- Power imbalance between parents and the state family regulation agency
- Lack of information about resources for families at the front end
- Limitations of the existing system to disrupt the disproportional impacts on people of color, people experiencing poverty, and tribal communities

# THE SOLUTION

## PRE-FILING LEGAL REPRESENTATION

- Working with pregnant people, parents, hospitals, social workers, and DCYF caseworkers before there is a dependency petition
- Immediate intervention
- Legal advice, advocacy, and guidance in navigating child welfare investigation process
- Multidisciplinary team with parent ally or social service professional
- Local and county specific



## FUNDING: PRE-FILING PROGRAMS

- 2019-2021: The F.I.R.S.T. Clinic pilot: funded through grants.
- 2021: As part of OPD's supplemental budget appropriation, "\$250,000...for fiscal year 2022 and \$250,000...for fiscal year 2023... to contract with a free legal clinic that has a medical-legal partnership and that currently provides parent representation to at-risk clients in dependency cases..."
- "[T]he clinic must provide legal representation to parents who are pregnant or recently postpartum who are at risk of child abuse or neglect reports or investigations."
- Contract was awarded to The F.I.R.S.T. Clinic.
- 2023: pursuant to budget proviso (3), "\$1,000,000...for fiscal year 2024 and \$1,000,000...for fiscal year 2025" were appropriated "solely to provide prefiling legal representation to pregnant parents and parents of newborns at risk of removal by [DCYF]."
- Three contracts awarded:
  1. The F.I.R.S.T. Clinic
  2. Family First Legal Advocates
  3. Central Washington Preventative Legal Advocacy Project

## FUNDING: PRE-FILING PROGRAMS

- 2025: Parents Representation Program Operating Budget: \$1,000,000 for fiscal year 2026 and \$1,000,000 for fiscal year 2027 (no longer provided)
- 2026: Parents Representation Program Supplemental Budget: included \$500,000 for fiscal year 2027 for expansion of pre-filing representation





= Family First Legal Advocates (FFLA)
  = The F.I.R.S.T. Clinic
  = Central Washington Preventative Legal Advocacy Project

# HOW PRE-FILING PROGRAMS WORK

## How Do the Programs Get Referrals?

- ✓ Department (risk-only referrals; screened out referrals)
- ✓ Hospitals
- ✓ Service providers (PCAP, SUD providers, mental health providers, etc.)
- ✓ Other community members/providers

## What Do the Pre-Filing Teams Look Like?

- ✓ Attorney
- ✓ Parent with lived experience/social services worker
- ✓ Paralegal (CWPLAP)

## How Does the Interdisciplinary Team Work?

- ✓ Meets the parent where they are (often with the parent with lived experience first)
- ✓ Attorney handles legal portions of case
- ✓ Meets immediate needs (concrete goods and resources, housing, treatment, food, etc.)

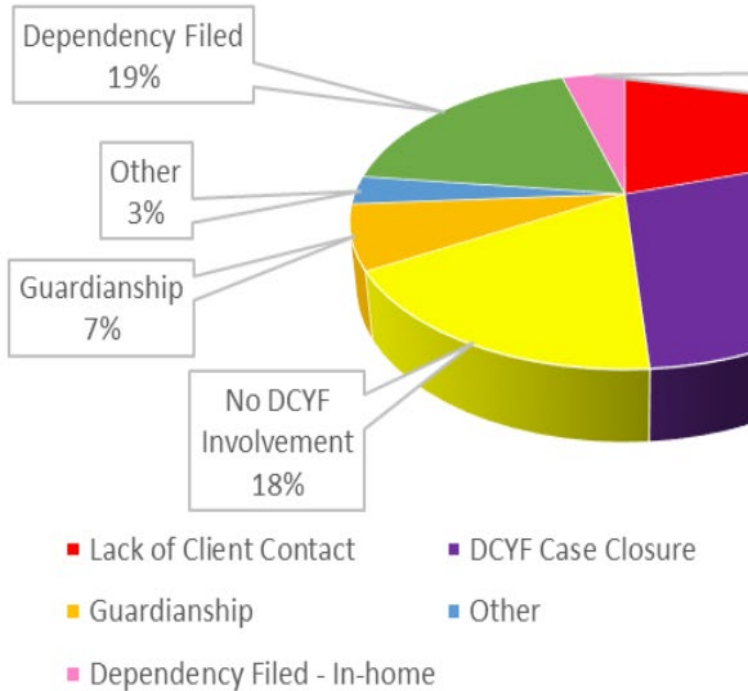
# OUTCOMES AND TRENDS SINCE LAUNCHING PREFILING REPRESENTATION

- ✓ Cases closed, January 2024 to December 2025: 622
- ✓ Cases avoiding a dependency filing: 75%

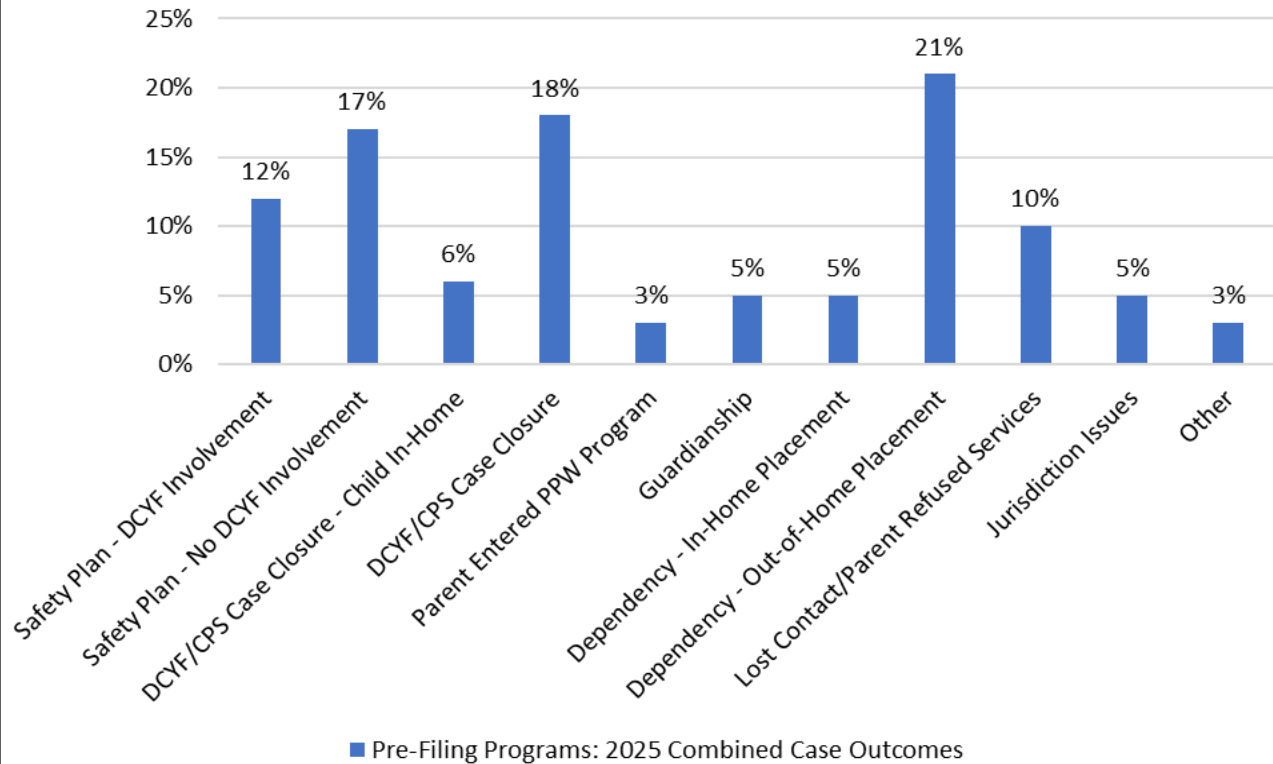


# OUTCOMES AND TRENDS SINCE LAUNCHING PREFILING REPRESENTATION

Washington State Office of Public  
Programs: 2024 Combined C

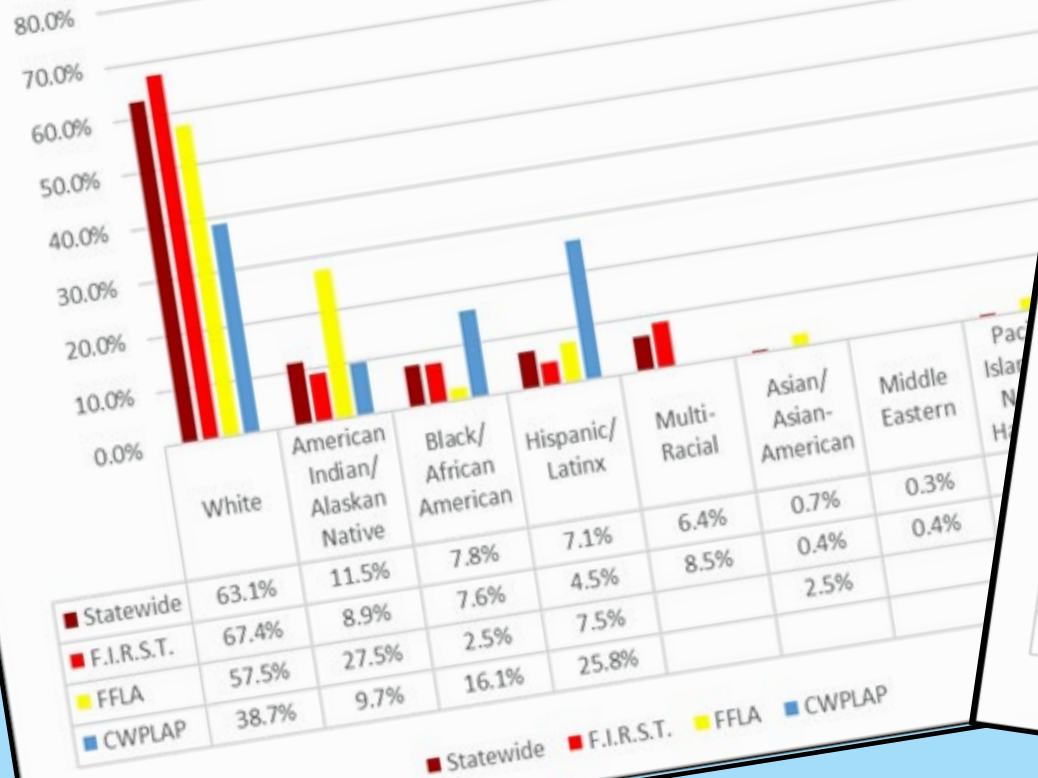


Pre-Filing Programs: 2025 Combined Case Outcomes

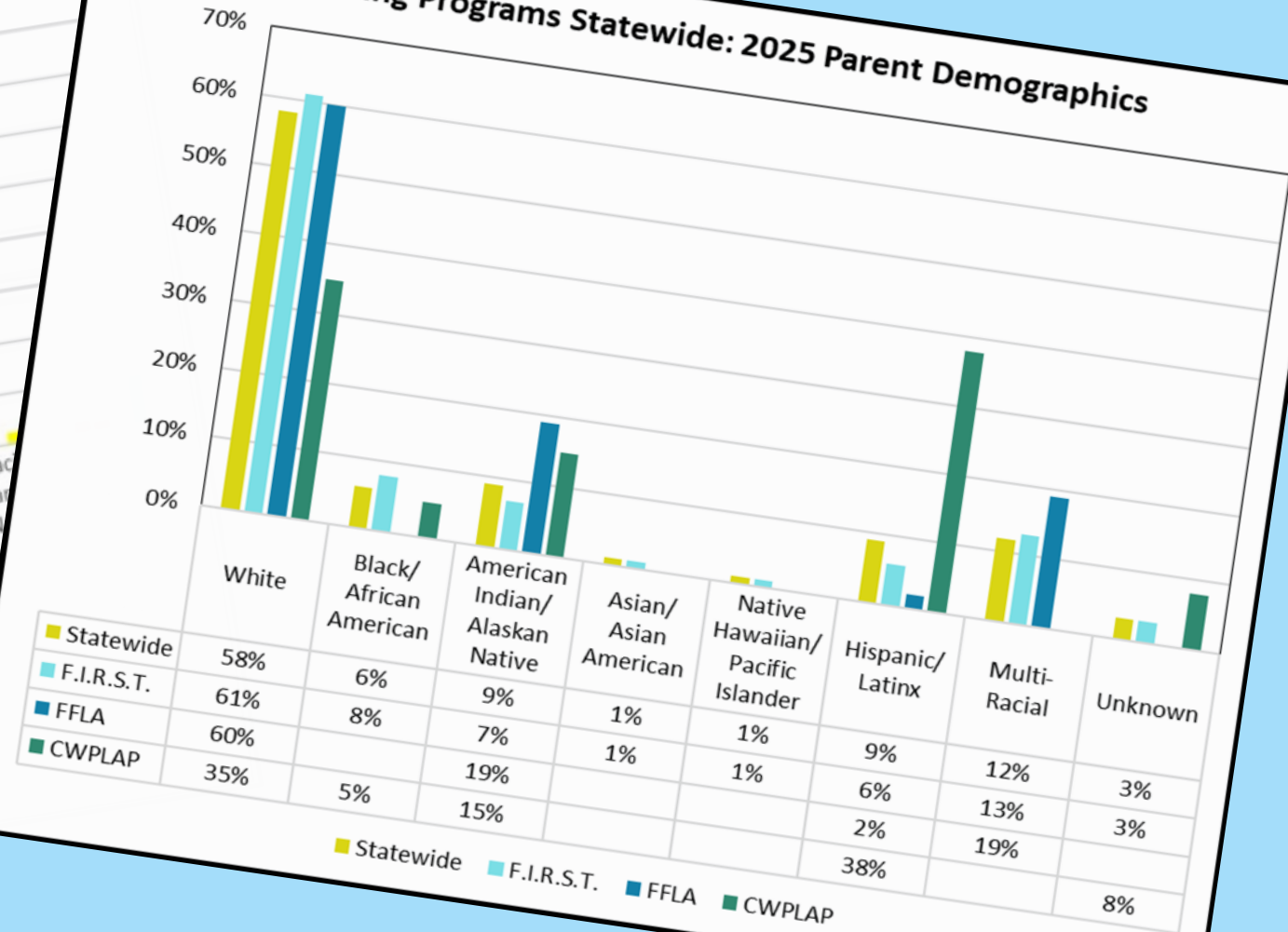


# OUTCOMES AND TRENDS SINCE LAUNCHING PREFILING REPRESENTATION

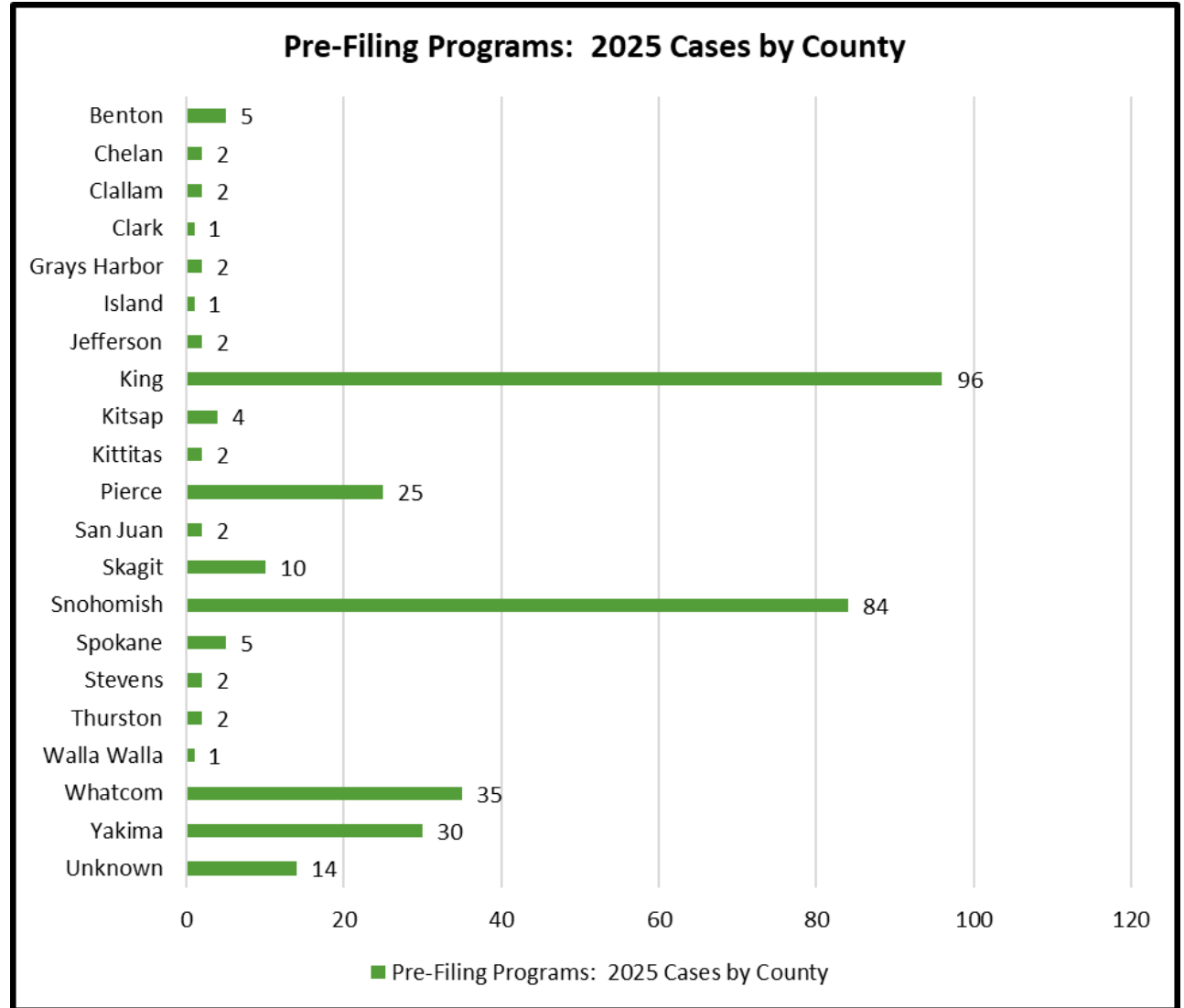
## Pre-Filing Programs Statewide: 2024 Case Demographics



## Pre-Filing Programs Statewide: 2025 Parent Demographics



OUTCOMES AND  
TRENDS SINCE  
LAUNCHING  
PREFILING  
REPRESENTATION



# LIMITATION OF PRE-FILING PROGRAMS

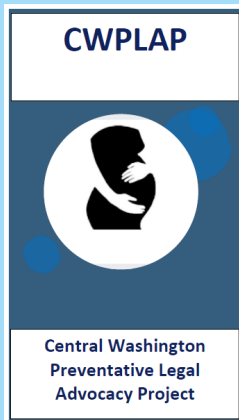
Age of the  
Child

Financial  
Limitations

Necessity for  
Collaboration

Span of Time

# PRE-FILING LEGAL REPRESENTATION PANEL



- Rebecca Dombcik, Attorney
- Felicia Risley, Parent Ally



- Jennifer Tepker, Attorney
- Jamie Page, Social Service Professional/ Parent Ally



- Jennifer Justice, Parent Ally

# QUESTIONS FOR THE PANEL



**PANEL QUESTION #1: HOW DOES PRE-FILING WORK DIFFER FROM IN-COURT PRACTICE?**

PANEL QUESTION #2: WHAT IS  
THE ROLE OF PARENTS WITH  
LIVED EXPERIENCE? HOW IS  
THE ROLE IMPORTANT?





PANEL QUESTION #3: HOW  
IS THE WORK COUNTY-  
SPECIFIC?



PANEL QUESTION #4: WHAT NEW AND INTERESTING TOOLS ARE IN YOUR TOOLBELT AS A RESULT OF YOUR PRE-FILING WORK?

PANEL QUESTION #5:  
WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS  
OF PRE-FILING WORK FOR  
FAMILIES?



A person is standing in a dark, empty room. A single, vertical beam of light illuminates the person and the wall behind them, creating a strong contrast with the surrounding darkness. The person is positioned at the bottom center of the frame, looking towards the wall. The overall mood is contemplative and focused.

PANEL QUESTION #6: WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS  
YOU HAVE ENCOUNTERED, AND HOW HAVE  
YOU OVERCOME THOSE BARRIERS?

A high-angle, low-key photograph of five young adults (three women and two men) of diverse ethnicities and ages. They are arranged in a circle on a concrete floor, with their arms raised and hands reaching towards the center. They are all looking upwards with expressions of hope and anticipation. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows. A white circular vent is visible on the floor in the lower right quadrant.

**PANEL QUESTION #7: HOW DO YOU COLLABORATE  
WITH OUTSIDE PARTNERS TO SUPPORT PARENTS  
WORKING IN THE PREVENTION SPACE?**



**PANEL QUESTION #8: HOW HAS THIS WORK MADE A DIFFERENCE FOR YOU OR FOR FAMILIES WORKING IN THE PREVENTION SPACE?**

INTERESTED? REACH OUT!

For further information, contact  
Marci Comeau, Managing Attorney,  
at [marci.comeau@opd.wa.gov](mailto:marci.comeau@opd.wa.gov)

