

Washington Early Childhood Courts Active Community Team

Purpose

Active Community Teams (ACTs) provide strategic guidance and broad oversight to local Early Childhood Courts (ECCs), focusing on how to improve local and system responses to infants, toddlers, and families involved in the child welfare system. This group will stimulate cross-sector collaboration in the community, working together to address a wide variety of key issues impacting the ECC in their county. This includes identifying and responding to gaps in services; setting local benchmarks; and advocating for local policies and procedures to sustain best practices across systems. ACTs are located in each community that operates an ECC, guided by each courts' judicial leadership, and coordinated and facilitated by the Community Coordinator.

ACTs are additionally responsible for ensuring their local courts' alignment to core components outlined in [2SSB 5331](#) – which set the standard for all ECCs operating in Washington – as well as supporting the priorities identified by the State Advisory Board. **The work of the ACT will be centered on addressing racial disproportionality; elevating parent voice; and prioritizing reunification.**

ACTs are expected to be reflective of the communities they serve, and include a comprehensive representation of parents, professionals in early childhood services, and individuals impacted by involvement in the dependency systems. Communities should utilize their dependency court demographics to ensure that ACT membership equitably represents the populations involved in this system, including considerations of race/ethnicity, LGBTQ+ status, and disability.

Role of the Active Community Team

- Prioritize equity, parent empowerment, and family reunification throughout all ECC processes and strategy
- Ensure court practices are in alignment with the core components outlined in 2SSB 5331
- Using dependency and community data, develop local benchmarks, with a continuous review of local standards and the statewide goals determined by the State Advisory Board
- Utilize data to support ECC effectiveness, with a focus on racial disproportionality, equity, program success, and areas for improvement
- Identify and advocate on behalf of the ECC to support local policy changes; provide insight and recommendations to the State Advisory Board on legislative priorities that further support the goals of ECCs

What is an Early Childhood Court (ECC)?

An Early Childhood Court (ECC) is a therapeutic court utilizing the Safe Babies Court Team™ (SBCT) approach in their program structure and operations. ECCs take a team approach to addressing child welfare cases involving families with children under the age of three.

[2SSB 5331](#) standardizes ECCs across WA to align with research-based core components known to provide positive outcomes for babies, toddlers, and their families.

- Identify and support community-specific initiatives that further the goals and sustainability of the ECC; strengthen the network of services for infants, toddlers, and their families throughout the local community
- Provide advocacy, support, and recommendations that address gaps and trends in services
- Support opportunities to optimize the ECC's sustainability, including an understanding of local, state and federal funding streams and private philanthropic opportunities
- Attend and recommend trainings that support the increased knowledge of best practices and improved court functions in serving infants, toddlers, and their families
- Consider opportunities to expand ECCEs to multiple dockets within the local court system

Commitment

Each community will determine the frequency and length of meetings; please speak with your local court's Community Coordinator for more details.

What Guides our Work

In Washington State, we are led by our Mission, Vision, and Values statements:

- **Mission:** To promote lasting, positive outcomes for parents, infants, and toddlers in the child welfare system by transforming the court process to be parent-centered, relationship-based, racially and culturally equitable, and collaborative
- **Vision:** Parents, infants, and toddlers are safe, healthy and thriving in communities where equity, relationships, and collaboration are celebrated
- **Values:** Collaboration, community, empowerment, hope, relationship, integrity

About the Safe Babies Court Team™ Approach

In Washington State, children under the age of three made up 42% of dependency cases filed in 2018.¹ That same year, of all children who entered care in the state, 25.6% were infants under 1 year, the second-highest rate in the country.² We know that families of color are disproportionately involved in Washington's child welfare system. Overrepresentation in dependency case filings are especially evident among American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) and Black children under the age of three.³

The Safe Babies Court Team™ (SBCT) approach is a community engagement and systems-change initiative focused on reducing trauma and improving how courts, child welfare and child-serving organizations work together to support young children in, or at-risk of entering, the child welfare system. Pierce County spearheaded this work in Washington State based on the SBCT approach with support from ZERO TO THREE, and through a funding opportunity by the US Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), three new sites have been established in Kitsap, Thurston, and Spokane counties. This work will be supported by 2SSB 5331 – a bill that codifies a standard of practice for early childhood court programs, and sets into statute the core components of the SBCT approach.

¹ Orme, M., McCurley, C., Bricker, C., Sanford, R., Wang, W. (2019) Dependent Children in Washington State: Case Timeliness and Outcomes, 2018 Annual Report. Olympia, WA: Center for Court Research, Administrative Office of the Courts. <https://www.courts.wa.gov/subsite/wscrc/docs/2018DTR.pdf>

² Children's Bureau. 2018 Child Welfare Outcomes Report Data. <https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/enteredCare/index>

³ Orme, M., McCurley, C., Bricker, C., Sanford, R., Wang, W.