



## STRATEGY PROFILE

SUPPORTING VULNERABLE  
FAMILIES

# Strengthening Families, Saving Money

**How Washington State Launched a Successful Program to Allow Parents to Serve Their Sentences from Home with Their Children**

**IN 2010, WASHINGTON STATE'S DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS (DOC)** was grappling with a number of problems around prison overcrowding, reduced budgets, and the very real social consequences of separating children from parents due to incarceration. A parent sentenced to prison often left behind children who suffered from the loss of nurturing and connection with that parent and the breakdown in family stability. In some cases, the children were placed in foster care, losing not only a parent but also a familiar home.

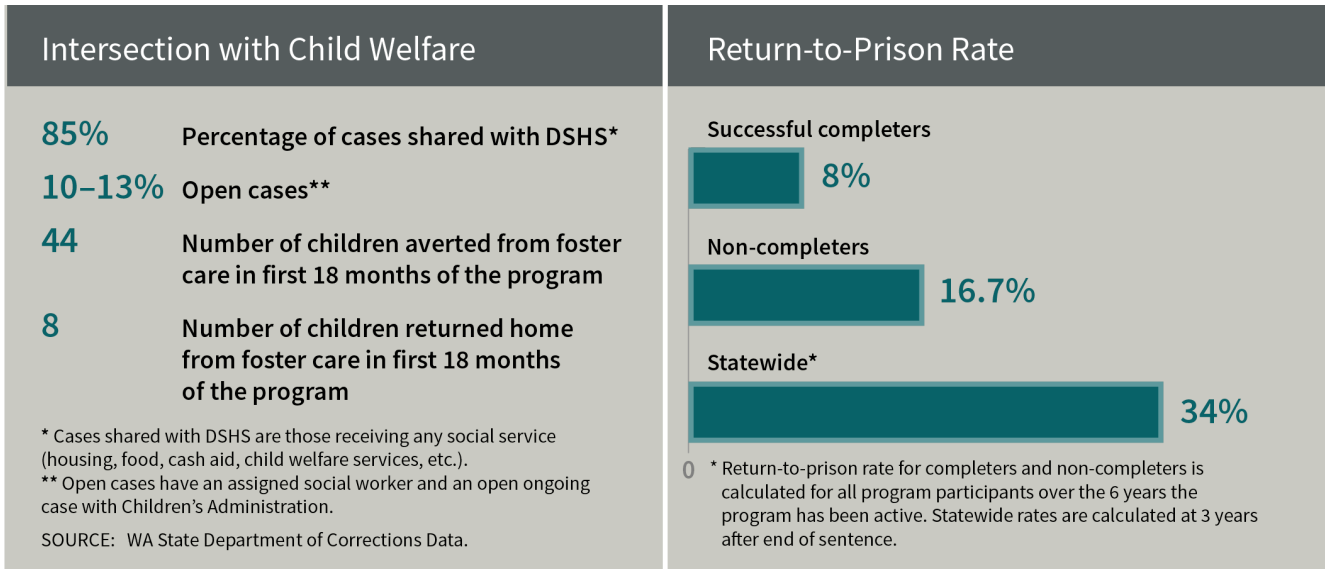
In an effort to address all of these issues, the Washington Department of Corrections (DOC) submitted the Parenting Sentencing Alternative Substitute Senate Bill (SSB 6639) to the legislature. That bill, which became law in June 2010, gives nonviolent offenders who are parents of minor-aged children the opportunity to serve all or part of their sentence at home with their children. The program is used with both mothers and fathers and, over the past 7 years, has allowed 577 parents to be home with their children, keeping families together and parent-child bonds strong.

The tremendous success of the program speaks for itself:

- Of 577 participants, 79 percent completed the program.
- Among participants, there was an 8-percent return-to-prison rate, compared to the state average of 34 percent. (Interestingly, even the 21 percent who were unable to complete the program still had a significantly reduced recidivism rate of 16.7 percent.)
- In the first 18 months of the program, 44 children avoided entry into foster care, and eight returned home from foster care because their parents were there to take care of them.
- Participating offenders say that the program has enabled them to reconnect with their children, learn how to be more consistent and resilient, and build their self-confidence.
- The state has seen savings in corrections and child welfare costs since the program's launch.

*"We're saving money phenomenally around social cost, foster care cost, incarceration cost, but, honestly, I think the bigger benefit is the maintaining of that parental bond."*

—Susie Leavell, Program Administrator,  
Washington State Department of Corrections



### HOW THE LAW WORKS

The legislation created **two** alternatives for parents convicted of nonviolent and non-sex-related offenses to receive supervision in lieu of incarceration.

- **Family and Offender Sentencing Alternative (FOSA)**—Judges can waive a sentence and impose 12 months of community custody along with conditions for treatment and programming for eligible parent offenders.
- **Community Parenting Alternative (CPA)**—The DOC can transfer a parent offender home on electronic home monitoring for up to the last 12 months of his or her sentence. CPA recommendations are determined by a diverse review board of corrections, social work, and child welfare professionals who also assist in structuring the needs and community resources for program participants. The review board looks at the best interests of the child or children involved, that is, the emotional and physical well-being of the children (not necessarily the legal definition). If granted CPA, the parent’s transfer and implementation process are carefully overseen by DOC personnel and other experts.

### HOW IT WORKS AT HOME

Parents approved to participate must meet the conditions for success:

- **Identify a sponsor or family member:** Each participant may have a sponsor or family member with whom they live for the duration of their sentence. During the screening process, the parent and the parent’s sponsor receive information about program rules, expectations, and responsibilities. A Community Corrections Officer (CCO) completes a home investigation and provides written materials. The goal is to create a teamwork atmosphere in which the sponsor can actively support and reinforce the program and is comfortable communicating needs and successes with the CCO.
- **Keep a structured schedule:** CPA participants complete their prison sentences at home on electronic monitoring and must have structured itineraries in place as well as approval for all community activities.

Sentencing Alternative	Total # of Participants	# of Successful Completions	% of Successful Completions
Combined	598	470	79%
CPA	326	276	85%
FOSA	272	194	71%



These requirements create a “step-down” process to help participants transition from the highly structured prison environment. Participants must account for their time while in the home and community and identify how they prioritize their children in daily activities. Outings must be approved, and activities must be focused on the family, school, work, or treatment and programming.

- **Work with Community Correction Officers:** Corrections officers who have received special social work training monitor parents through home and community visits, with more intensive monitoring gradually giving way to less frequent monitoring, as participants show progress in such areas as parenting skills and implementation of structure and routine. Along with the face-to-face contact with participants and their children and families, CCOs also reach out to collateral contacts such as treatment providers, employers, and others who work with participants.
- **Adopt a Present Parenting approach:** Each participant is asked to take a Present Parenting approach with their children. The cornerstones of Present Parenting are (1) being clean and sober and (2) prioritizing children in daily decisions. In addition, parents make a commitment to 20 minutes of daily reading or homework with children and to family dinners without television or other electronic distractions.

## WHY IT WORKS

- **One-on-one support**, with CCOs offering coaching and support to parents on such issues as establishing a daily routine, good nutrition, child well-being and discipline, employment, and prioritizing children’s needs
- **Emphasis on each parent’s strengths**, not flaws or deficits, to help parents build their skills
- **Promotion of protective factors** that can build parental strengths, such as knowledge of parenting and child development, resilience, social connections, concrete support, and promoting children’s social and emotional competence
- **Solution-based case management**, a technique to help the CCO focus on the family to support the safety and well-being of the children

### PARENTS ARE SAYING...

*“I am not parenting out of guilt like I used to. I am able to make positive choices for myself and my family.”*

—Mother Participant

*“Since starting FOSA, I have been given a second chance to change. I have been given more time with my kids, we read daily and eat meals together.”*

—Father Participant

*“The changes I’ve seen in my son has been his improvement in his school efforts, his attitude, responsibilities and his ability to communicate better with me. My daughter has expressed to me how much better it is to have her mom to be able to talk to, ask for guidance, and she has started therapy to help her heal from all that she has been through with me and her dad being in prison most of her life.”*

—Mother Participant

*“The CPA program has helped me in many different ways, one of the ways is how close it has got me with my wife and kids, now I cook for them, I read to them, I go to all their soccer games and practices in general be there for them if they need me.”*

—Father Participant

## IN SUMMARY

What started as a way to solve the problems of reduced state funding and an overcrowded prison resulted in a win-win for convicted parents, their children, DOC staff, and the citizens of Washington State. Many parents convicted of nonviolent crimes are now able to serve their sentences while taking care of their children and building their parenting skills. CCOs use their new social work skills to monitor parents and help strengthen families. Additionally, Washington's citizens experience the benefits of funding diverted from prisons and, more importantly, reduced crime by previous offenders.

To learn more about the Washington State Department of Corrections' programs for convicted and incarcerated parents who can serve time at home with their children, contact Susie Leavell, Program Administrator, Washington State Department of Corrections at 360-725-8535 or [susan.leavell@doc.wa.gov](mailto:susan.leavell@doc.wa.gov).

### For Further Information

- "An Unlikely Partnership: Strengthening Families Touched by Incarcerations (Children's Bureau video) at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJiA\\_NrXyGI&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJiA_NrXyGI&feature=youtu.be)
- "Promising outcomes for a parenting sentencing alternative" (blog) by Susie Leavell, Vera Institute of Justice, at <https://www.vera.org/blog/promising-outcomes-for-a-parenting-sentencing-alternative>
- Aguiar, C. M. & Leavell, S. (2017). A statewide parenting alternative sentencing program: Description and preliminary outcomes. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 87, 78-93.

### CHILDREN ARE SAYING...

*"Having my dad home makes me feel comfortable at night."*

—Son of a Participant

*"Having my dad home makes me feel happy again around the house."*

—Daughter of a Participant

*"Having my daddy home makes me feel relaxed and loved again by him."*

—Daughter of a Participant

