

Integrating Paid Family and Medical Leave and Help Me Grow Washington Services

Report to the Legislature

December 2021

Introduction

A proviso under the 2020 operating budget, Substitute Senate Bill 6168, directed the Employment Security Department (Department) to submit a report to the Governor and Legislature concerning the ability for the Paid Family and Medical Leave (Paid Leave) program and a statewide family resource, referral, and linkage system to provide integrated services to eligible beneficiaries. The family resource, referral, and linkage system has been identified as Help Me Grow Washington (HMG), and WithinReach serves as the Washington Affiliate for this national system.

This report will also include a brief description of the Paid Leave and HMG programs, the coordination between the programs so far, including the impacts COVID-19 has had on our outreach and collaboration efforts throughout the past several months, future strategies we intend to pursue, and an analysis of any statutory changes needed to allow information and data to be shared between the two programs.

Paid Family and Medical Leave and Help Me Grow Programs

Washington State's Paid Family and Medical Leave Program, administered through the Leave and Care Division of the Employment Security Department, provides Washingtonians with paid time off from their work to care for: themselves or a family member during recovery or treatment of a serious health condition or injury; to bond with a new child in the home through birth or placement; or for certain events connected to a family member's active-duty military service.

Eligible employees receive wage replacement payments from the state based on a percentage of their typical weekly earnings up to 90 percent. Depending on individual circumstances and situations, an eligible employee may receive up to 16 weeks of combined paid family and medical leave per year. If the person has complications related to a pregnancy, they may be approved for an additional two weeks. The leave does not need to be taken all at once. For example, a person may only need four weeks to recover from a surgery, or leave could be approved to take one day off a week to support a family member undergoing treatment for a chronic illness or to receive an intermittent medical treatment themselves.

The program is funded through small contributions that come from both workers and employers. The premium for employees is currently assessed at 0.4 percent of an

employee's gross wages and will increase to 0.6 percent beginning January 1, 2022¹. Premium responsibility is shared by the employee and employer. The weekly benefit range is up to 90 percent, depending on income. The less an employee makes, the higher percent of their pay that person gets. The maximum weekly benefit amount paid for 2021 is \$1,206 and will be \$1,327 for 2022. This benefit amount is adjusted every year based on the state average weekly wage².

These benefits are available for most employees who experience a qualifying event³ and worked 820 hours in Washington during the previous year. Premium assessment for the program began in January 2019. Individuals were able to apply for the benefit in January 2020.

Help Me Grow Washington is a system model that promotes statewide collaboration in order to build upon existing early childhood resources to promote protective factors among families and mitigate the impact of adversity. By connecting families to existing community services through a coordinated access point or call center, HMG provides timely access to resources and care coordination to reduce barriers to services. HMG is organized around four main components: the coordinated access point for resource connection; data collection and evaluation to systematically identify service gaps in the region; family and community outreach; and health provider outreach. By working closely with health providers, HMG seeks to be a resource to address the social determinants of health, providing holistic care to families and reducing the burden of finding and accessing community resources. In Washington state, HMG has added two components critical to supporting families with young children: equity and advocacy.

The successful implementation of the HMG core components and structural requirements depend on the shared commitment and coordination across state, regional, and local partners. The tri-leadership HMG core team shares the organizing entity roles across WithinReach, Washington Communities for Children, and the Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF).

¹ This rate is assessed by ESD annually as required under RCW 50A.10.030.

² Under RCW 50A.15.020, each year ESD must adjust the maximum weekly benefit amount to ninety percent of the state average weekly wage.

³ Two bills passed during the 2020 legislative session that affected the Paid Leave Program. E2SHB 1073 temporarily expanded coverage of the Program for those affected by COVID 19, and ESSB 5097 permanently expanded the definition of "Family Member" for the purposes of qualifying for the Program.

- WithinReach serves two distinct roles in the HMG Washington network. As the state affiliate, WithinReach co-leads HMG expansion and infrastructure development to achieve comprehensive statewide implementation of the model components. Additionally, WithinReach houses the statewide Coordinated Access Point facilitating an ease of access to the resources families want and need at the right time, as well as providing reliable information to providers and partners.
- Washington Communities for Children (WCFC) is a regional coalition network with a mission to connect local and statewide efforts to improve the wellbeing of children, families, and communities. WCFC coordinates planning and design of HMG at the regional level through their statewide network, identifies and braids funding opportunities to support regional implementation, and advocates for systems and policies that support children and families.
- DCYF works within state agencies to connect and align emerging opportunities with HMG efforts. DCYF also administers the federal Preschool Development Grant funds, of which HMG is a key activity.

See Appendix A of this report for more examples that describe WithinReach's partnerships related to referral pathway development.

Coordination of Services

The COVID-19 pandemic affected all aspects of the Department's work, including outreach. Moving to an entirely virtual model of work meant in-person events ceased and presentations the program had been giving were significantly impacted, changing focus of presentations to assisting individuals and businesses affected by the pandemic. Staff time and resources had to be shifted to respond to the emergent nature of the pandemic for much of the spring and summer. While the crisis did result in some delays, the team was able to pick up the planning and collaboration for this effort in the latter part of the year and has since identified wide-ranging areas to connect with the statewide linkage system. We expect to activate some key measures in the coming weeks and months.

Recognizing the impact of the pandemic, Paid Leave and HMG staff have had several meetings, and have begun to develop a communication strategy to advertise the services the programs provide. In addition to a targeted communications plan, staff representing both programs have met to discuss potential long- and short-term strategies for integrating and communicating our services.

Communication and partnership initiatives that have been or will be implemented in 2021:

- Leave and Care Division staff participated in a virtual training on October 19, 2021 to provide WithinReach staff with a comprehensive overview of the Paid Leave Program so that WithinReach could better inform their customers about the Paid Leave program and provide program resources and contacts; and
- Links and general information about the Paid Leave program and HMG Washington have been posted on each of the respective websites, with collaborative messaging to incentivize people to seek out information for the other program.

Communication and partnership strategies we intend to pursue in the next year:

- Develop and coordinate informational webinars and outreach presentations to hold in the next year;
- Further develop language and training modules for customer service teams to identify people who are candidates for provided services and identify trigger points for referral to ensure they are given proper programmatic information and resources;
- Continue to develop cross-training resources so each program is familiar with the services offered by the other;
- Develop targeted strategies specifically for lower income families, or other specific demographics;
- Research the existence of multiagency workgroups created to address poverty and/or the availability of social programs and services and reach out to offer partnership;
- Utilize existing social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.) to push out information and resources;
- Explore how the statewide Help Me Grow early childhood resource directory can best support the Paid Leave resource list; and
- Explore development of referral pathways via Help Me Grow to connect families receiving the Paid Leave benefit with system partners (such as WIC or Childcare Aware).

Longer term goals and strategies, with potentially more complex administrative, technological, fiscal, and implementation components⁴:

- Explore adding language to certain letters, official materials, and correspondence emails describing the partnered program with contact information. If delivered electronically, this could include a direct link to a webpage or other online resources;
- Based on the type of leave requested in an application, send automated email messages directing applicants to other services or programs that may be of assistance; and
- Create an integrated technology bridge that allows for direct referrals between the programs.

Statutory Recommendations

Both the Paid Leave program and HMG can begin educating individuals about each other's services by pursuing several of the strategies described above without the need for statutory changes. Changes to statute would only be necessary if conditions were present where protected employer or individual information needed to be shared between the Paid Leave program and HMG. If there were to be a direct referral service, the Paid Leave program would need express permission for this either by statute, or authorization of individuals accessing Paid Leave services to refer.

Currently, privacy and personal information protection laws for the Paid Leave program are under chapter 50A.25 RCW. These laws mandate that any information or records concerning an individual or employer obtained by the Department shall be private and confidential, unless certain conditions or circumstances exist.

It may be helpful to have statutory language specifically authorizing the sharing of certain personal data to help facilitate information and services. For example, under RCW 50A.25.010, which speaks to private and confidential information, it may be useful for a subsection to be added clarifying that certain information can be shared between the two agencies, and only the two agencies, to help facilitate providing services efficiently.

⁴ Viability for these options would require further research and coordination with information technology/product development and other divisions and programs within ESD.

General outreach, without the need to share personal and identifying information between programs, would not require legislative action.

Conclusion

The Paid Family and Medical Leave program and Help Me Grow Washington are excited about accelerating our partnership to continue coordinating our communication and outreach strategies. Some strategies are underway, some we intend to implement in the near term, while others will require more research and planning.

Several strategies described throughout this report can begin without the need for legislative change, and we look forward to working with all interested parties should legislation be necessary to fully realize some aspects of the communication, coordination, and outreach described throughout this report.

Appendix A

Referrals to Home Visiting and Parent Support Resources via eJAS

In partnership with the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), WithinReach utilizes the electronic JOBS Automated System (eJAS) to help connect families enrolled in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to Home Visiting and/or local parenting support programs. The eJAS computer application system is managed by the Information Technology Solutions (ITS) Division within the Economic Services Administration (ESA) at DSHS. Via this electronic referral pathway, DSHS WorkFirst case managers, as well as social workers, seamlessly refer families to WithinReach care coordinators. In order to access client cases in eJAS, WithinReach staff must sign an Economic Services Non-Disclosure Agreement, complete eJAS training offered by DSHS staff, and must follow a 2-step authentication process by logging into a Secure Access Washington (SAW) account and then the eJAS system. To initiate a referral to WithinReach, DSHS staff complete a unique referral template designed specifically for this referral pathway. Additionally, they must select a contractor code assigned to WithinReach care coordination as well as a component to designate the type of support services a family is seeking. A referral sent to WithinReach includes client and family demographics, contact information, and case notes. An E-Communication feature in eJAS allows the two parties to deliver correspondence to each other in a secure manner and provide critical status updates. Upon completing care coordination, WithinReach staff return the eJAS referral and close the component which notifies the referring party of client case outcomes.

Access to the WAHealthPlanFinder.org Application Interface

To assist clients with the health insurance enrollment process, all WithinReach direct staff must complete rigorous training before becoming certified Washington Healthplanfinder navigators. To initiate the training process, staff who intend to receive the proper certification are required to pass a comprehensive background check that includes broad and narrow jurisdiction searches. Upon passing the background screening, staff gain access to the Washington Health Benefit Exchange's (WAHBE) Learning Management System (LMS) and begin a series of training modules, each

followed by an exam. Upon completing and passing all learning modules, staff must complete the Washington Health Benefit Exchange User Agreement and are also required to observe three, start-to-finish, health insurance enrollments. Once they have met this requirement, a Job Shadow Attestation is completed and sent to WAHBE staff to grant the trainee access to work directly with clients. Certified navigators help clients by inputting Personal Identifying Information (PII) into the web-based application which provides real-time eligibility verification for Medicaid and Qualified Health Plans. Navigators also provide clients with “next steps” and ensure that they understand how to utilize their coverage.