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WATCH: Record child deaths fuel fierce debate over WA safety standards

By Carleen Johnson | The Center Square

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(The Center Square) - A Republican lawmaker who has spent years trying to protect children in homes where the Department of Children, Youth & Families is involved, says a bill offered by majority Democrats to address the tragedy is “like putting lipstick on a pig.”

Rep. Travis Couture, R-Allyn, has been sounding the alarm in the wake of the passage of the **Keeping Families Together Act** in 2021, which made active drug use alone was not enough for courts to remove children from parents.

Couture offered several amendments to strengthen **Substitute House Bill 2660**, a bill Couture says worries more about protecting drug using parents than saving the lives of babies and toddlers. During a Monday House Appropriations Committee hearing, the only an amendment approved by the Democratic majority was that if substance use contributed to the risk for the child, then the court can require sobriety or proof of treatment compliance before a decision is made to allow a child to remain in the home.



SHB 2660 “authorizes the court to order a parent to comply with the least restrictive conditions necessary to maintain the safety of a child who is under age 5 in the home if the court finds that there is reasonable cause to believe that these conditions are necessary to maintain the safety of the child when the child is released to the care of a parent following a shelter care hearing,” according to the bill summary.

Couture’s issue with the bill is the child can only be taken out of the home if the court finds that reasonable efforts have been made to prevent or eliminate the need for removal and removal of the child is necessary to prevent imminent physical harm due to child abuse or neglect.

Bill sponsor Rep. Lillian Ortiz-Self, D-Mukilteo, told members of the House Early Learning Committee during a Jan 27 hearing, that the Keeping Families Together Act is not to blame for an increase in critical incidents involving children.

“Are there critical incidents? Yes,” she said. “And even one is one too many and so we must address critical incidents that continue to occur. That have occurred before the law, during the law and after the law.”

Ortiz-Self said the critical incident data shows that 82% are in the newborn to age three category and her bill extends special focus on families with children up to age five.

The legislation does give judges more flexibility in ordering the parents into treatment and services, but according to Couture, it still doesn't do enough to ensure children are not left languishing in homes with drug-addicted caregivers.

One of his amendments would move away from the imminent harm standard.

"When you use the word imminent, that is a measure of time," Couture said. "And what this amendment would do is change the standard at which the court determines whether to remove a child from the home to require that the court remove the child when necessary to prevent substantial risk of serious harm instead of imminent physical harm in the current law.

"When you can't care for, clothe, bathe, feed, and shelter yourself, how can you do that for a child?" he asked.

"You can't do it for a child and that's why we've seen an incredible rise in critical incidents, including child death as a result, especially as it relates to fentanyl."

The Center Square has **written extensively** on the devastating increase in critical incidents involving children.

During a Tuesday media availability, Rep. April Connors, R-Kennewick, who sits on the House Appropriations Committee, recalled Couture's emotional pleading with the majority.

"I was sitting next to Rep. Couture yesterday and he was visibly shaking," Connors said. "He has put his heart and soul into trying to get this law fixed. And one of the things he said yesterday is he said, two years ago, he warned the majority that another 100 kids are going to have to die before we have done anything. And that's exactly what has happened."

Rep. Chris Corry, R-Yakima, said his caucus is not giving up on this critically important issue of life and death.

"We have to make this change," Corry said. "And when you see his [Rep. Couture's] emotion, I think we're all in that boat. We're all feeling that right now. We have more time. We are not giving up on this."

Another bill related to the reporting of critical incidents, sponsored by Sen. Nikki Torres, R-Pasco, passed on the Senate floor Tuesday afternoon.

SB 5977 directs the Department of Children, Youth, and Families to issue a report when a child near fatality review is conducted and to post that report on the same webpage as fatality review reports.

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Editorials

Stop dodging and face facts: More kids are dying on DCYF's watch

Jan. 12, 2026 at 8:00 am | *Updated Jan. 12, 2026 at 9:00 am*

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Tana Senn, DCYF secretary, has deflected questions about a child welfare crisis, writes the editorial board. Senn is pictured with Gov. Bob Ferguson in Seattle on Nov. 12, 2025. (Karen Ducey / The Seattle Times)

By [The Seattle Times editorial board](#)

When record numbers of children die or suffer near-fatal injuries at the hands of their parents, alarm bells should sound. Loudly. Especially when those kids were already on the state's radar as potentially unsafe.

That's exactly what's happened in Washington over the last two years. So, it behooves lawmakers to take a hard look at the Department of Children, Youth & Families, whose primary mission is keeping kids safe.

Last month, all 19 Senate Republicans signed a letter asking the Democratic leadership for such an inquiry. There is particular urgency, they noted, in light of the [enormous legal settlements](#) being paid out by DCYF for past failures.

Sen. Claire Wilson, a Democrat who chairs both the Human Services Committee and the DCYF Oversight Board, dismissed the request. The problem, she said, is less about practice within the child welfare agency and more about a dearth of help for parents struggling with addiction.

"It's hard to hold people accountable when the services and support aren't there," Wilson said in an interview.

That's not what the child fatality reports show. Again and again, drug-addicted parents were offered treatment and refused it, or relapsed, or failed to follow through. Wilson should do some homework and reconsider.

More to the point, children's lives can't be hostage to a ledger sheet. Washington is indeed facing dire budget realities, and if drug treatment isn't readily available it's more important than ever to adjust protocols at DCYF. Perhaps by taking more kids into foster care, or at least by providing better oversight while they remain with their families.

Yet the opposite seems to be happening. Court filings to make kids legally dependent on the state have plunged 35% since 2021, when the Legislature passed its Keeping Families Together Act to shrink foster care.

This isn't necessarily a bad thing. There are powerful reasons to keep children out of that system. But the point is to do it safely, and Washington is failing that test. The evidence? Some 200 dead and severely injured children known to DCYF since 2023, more than the state has seen in a decade, or longer.

Tana Senn, secretary of the agency, has deflected questions about a child welfare crisis, preferring instead to blame fentanyl for the shocking spike in critical incidents — a 67% increase between 2020 and 2024.

But fentanyl is not the only culprit. Some children have been tortured. Or starved. Or accidentally suffocated.

One pattern unites them all: multiple referrals to Child Protective Services. One family was reported 85 times between 2012 and 2025, before their youngest, an infant, died.

This doesn't mean the Keeping Families Together Act itself is at fault. It means staff at DCYF have not been trained to understand and apply the law correctly. (For instance, only a judge can send a kid into foster care, but out of 47 incidents of severe child maltreatment during the first quarter of 2025, just two cases had been brought to court.)

It also means the agency, quite clearly, must change the way it assesses risk.

That's behind-the-scenes work Senn, who inherited this mess, needs to lead. Because outside her agency, advocates are increasingly angry. A group called Keeping Kids Safe [plans to rally](#) at the Capitol on Jan. 14, and its organizer says more than 100 people have signed up.

Their target is the Keeping Families Together Act, the latest example of a well-intended state law passed without the infrastructure essential to make it work.

As Sen. Leonard Christian, R-Spokane Valley, told the DCYF Oversight Board last month, "It's really hard to be concerned with a child's well-being when they're dead."

The Seattle Times editorial board: members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Ryan Blethen, Melissa Davis, Josh