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The Columbian

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Wash. disabilities program to be cut

State trims by 10%, program that many feared would end

By JAKE GOLDSTEIN-STREET
Washington State Standard

Washington state officials are keeping a long-standing program seen as vital to parents of children with developmental disabilities, but cutting its funding, ending weeks of unease about its future.

The state Department of Social and Health Services is trimming the Parent to Parent program by 10 percent, but won't eliminate it as was feared this summer. Its budget for the next year is around $877,000.

"I wish we hadn't received a cut at all, but it certainly could have been worse," said Tracie Hoppis, the statewide Parent to Parent manager.

Department of Social and Health Services spokesperson Jessica Nelson said the agency continues "to work to protect core services and ensure that Washington has a solid financial foundation for the long-term."

The episode provides a glimpse into the types of cuts Washington leaders will need to consider as they face ongoing budget woes. In the coming weeks, state agencies will make their requests to Gov. Bob Ferguson in the upcoming two-year spending plan he'll put forward in December.

Ferguson has pledged not to propose tax increases, and has instead said he'll look to fill the state's latest budget shortfall by cutting spending from newer programs, though Parent to Parent has been around for decades.

Parent to Parent provides support and resources for families of children with autism and other developmental disabilities. Its name comes from pairing newer parents with more experienced ones to help guide them through the complicated system of available resources, as well as provide community in what can otherwise be an isolating experience. It also features "sibshops" to support siblings of people with developmental disabilities.

The first Parent to Par-

DISABILITIES, Page A2

Camas family's nonprofit seeks a cure for **ALD**

Organization plans fundraiser run in Washougal to help their son and others affected by rare disease



Photos by **TAYLOR BALKOM**/The Columbian

The Wiener family — Ella, 1, clockwise from left, Terry, Theodore, 5, and Adam — play a game of Sorry! on Aug. 25 at the Wiener residence in Camas. Terry and Adam Wiener founded Cure ALD after their son, Theodore, was diagnosed with adrenoleukodystrophy, a rare genetic disease that can cause devastating neurological and adrenal damage.

"Yes, we're doing this for Theodore, (but) we've met so many other families impacted by ALD, so the scope has definitely gotten bigger."

Terry Wiener
Son has been diagnosed with rare neurological disease

By DOUG FLANAGAN
The Columbian

CAMAS — While pregnant with her second child in 2024, Terry Wiener had a routine genetic screening that revealed she carries the gene for adrenoleukodystrophy, a rare and devastating neurological disease that can rob children of their ability to walk, speak, see and survive.

Because ALD is linked to the X chromosome, each of her children had a 50 percent chance of inheriting the gene, which disproportionately affects males. Wiener and her husband, Adam, immediately tested their 3-year-old son, Theodore. His test came back positive.

"The emotions came fast," Adam Wiener said. "Anger at systems that nearly missed this. Powerlessness reading about treatment options that are invasive and risky. The particular sadness of knowing your beautiful child carries something he doesn't deserve."

The Wieners channeled their emotions into action by founding Cure ALD, a nonprofit that raises money and awareness for ALD research, with an emphasis on prevention and early intervention.

"Research is at the heart of it," Terry Wiener said. "We want to get more connected to and support people who are doing really innovative things. Yes, we're doing this for Theodore, (but) we've met so many other families impacted by ALD, so the scope has definitely gotten bigger."

The nonprofit will host its Race to Cure ALD fundraiser from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sept. 20 at Get To-Gather Farm in Washougal. The event will feature a 5K run, 1-mile walk, kids' dash, food and beverage vendors, a silent auction and farm activities. The Wieners plan to make it an annual event.

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Photos of Theodore and Ella Wiener hang on a fridge Aug. 25 at the Wiener residence in Camas.



Theodore Wiener, 5, plays with magnetic building squares Aug. 25 at the Wiener residence in Camas. Theodore was diagnosed with adrenoleukodystrophy, a rare genetic disease that can cause devastating neurological and adrenal damage.

Lawsuits costing state, cities

Committee mulls solutions to rein in cost of settlements

By MITCHELL ROLAND
The Spokesman-Review, Spokane

OLYMPIA — Lawsuits are costing local and state taxpayers in Washington too much, some lawmakers say.

Months after a proposal to change how state and local governments respond to claims of misconduct stalled, an advisory committee has spent much of the summer exploring how state lawmakers could rein in the mounting costs.

The debate centers on how to slow the growth of settlements while maintaining a system that allows citizens to hold governments accountable for wrongdoing.

Among the options discussed last week are limiting the statute of limitations for childhood sexual abuse, modifying the standard of care to narrow when the state can be held liable and limiting what percentage of payments attorneys can receive.

The discussion by the tort study committee, which comprises personal injury attorneys, victim advocates, and state and local govern-

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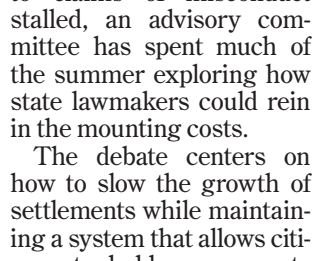

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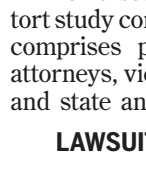

Extreme heat hurts education

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71°/59°

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Disabilities

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ent program in Washington was established in 1980 in King County. Today, it serves families of children and adults in all of Washington's 39 counties, with tens of thousands of calls and emails for assistance every year.

Program advocates were shocked to learn Parent to Parent was on the chopping block with a contract only through August, despite funding in the state budget. The Arc of Washington State oversees the statewide program under a contract with the state Department of Social and Health Services.

If the state didn't extend the contract, Parent to Parent would've ceased to exist, leaving families to traverse the complicated web of services with less support.

Supporters of the program were especially frustrated the funding could be cut outside the legislative process, without public input.

Given this, a bipartisan group of 44 state lawmakers urged Ferguson and Department of Social and Health Services Secretary Angela Ramirez to maintain the program.

Hoppis thanked these elected officials and others for helping secure the program's future.

"I feel really overwhelmed and a bit humbled with the level of support that we received," she said.

The 10 percent reduction will partly trim spending on multicultural coordinators, who help parents overcome language and other barriers, said Hoppis, who leads a Parent to Parent program in Yakima County. Many families in the program are Spanish speakers. And in Snohomish County, for example, a Parent to Parent program has a Russian coordinator.

"When it comes to Parent to Parent and the emotional support piece, that does not happen well through an interpreter," Hoppis said.

Broadly, reduced funding means the program potentially serves fewer families.

Advocates are asking legislators to reverse the cut and provide a modest increase in 2027. They also want Parent to Parent named specifically in next year's budget, so the money can't be redirected elsewhere.

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ALD

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"My first hope is to build awareness around this disease," Terry Wiener said. "I really hope that people feel a sense of pride and community, so much that year after year, they just want to help us make it bigger and better."

World Wrestling Entertainment superstar Sydney Luke, who performs as Maxxine Dupri, will attend as the organization's global ambassador. Luke's brother, Wyatt Zmrzel, was diagnosed with ALD at age 7, and her family later founded a nonprofit to raise awareness and support research into the disease.

"I watched my parents my whole life really, really struggle with managing a child with this disease, and it's just a horrific experience," Luke said. "If we can do anything to help even a single family, or find a cure for all of these young men and boys who are dealing with this, that's really the end goal. But at the end of the day, we can't do it without fundraising, so that's where these events come in. It's going to be really special for me to be there."



Photos by **TAYLOR BALKOM**/The Columbian

Terry Wiener, from left, hugs her son Theodore, 5, as dad Adam blows up a soccer ball and daughter Ella, 1, watches at the Wiener residence in Camas.



Terry and Adam Wiener founded Cure ALD after their son, Theodore, was diagnosed with the rare genetic disease. They are organizing a September fundraising run.



At right, Theodore Wiener, 5, center, slides down a small slide while his family hangs out at their home in Camas.

'No way to stop it'

Theodore, now 5, has no symptoms of the disease but is monitored with MRI scans every six months for signs of brain inflammation or disease progression. Terry Wiener describes him as an imaginative, energetic boy who recently started kindergarten and has developed a passion for soccer.

"He's a wonderful, kind, sweet person — and also kind of a jokester," she said. "And he loves his sister. He takes care of her and does all the 'big brother' things."

ALD affects about 1 in 10,500 births. It prevents the body from breaking down long-chain fatty acids, which can accumulate and damage the brain, spinal cord and adrenal glands.

In boys, the disease can rapidly destroy the brain's white matter, affecting their ability to walk, speak and see. In adult men, it more commonly appears as adrenomyeloneuropathy, a slower form of spinal cord damage that can cause progressive mobility problems and physical disability. ALD also can cause adrenal insufficiency, a potentially life-threatening condition requiring lifelong hormone replacement.

"We're stuck with knowing that one of those three things could happen, but not knowing when they could happen, and no way to stop it," Terry Wiener said.

Current treatments for brain lesions include bone marrow transplant and gene therapy, both of which carry significant risks.

"And you can't do any of this until you start seeing damage," Terry Wiener said. "No preventative care."

Terry Wiener said she has not experienced symptoms of ALD herself. Newborn screening indicated that her 1-year-old daughter, Ella, likely does not have the disease, but the Wieners have chosen to not pursue full genetic testing for her at this time.

The Wieners selected research projects at two universities to fund through their initial virtual fundraising campaign in February. Proceeds from the Race to Cure ALD will support gene therapy research at Harvard's Wyss Institute aimed at developing a potential cure and adrenal protection research at Stanford School of Medicine focused on a potential preventive treatment.

"They are all about translational research," Terry Wiener said. "They don't want research to just get stuck in the lab. They want the research to actually be shipped out and produced and manufactured and actually be in patients. I've met these people in person, so they don't feel abstract. That's what gives me hope."

Celebrity connection

While launching Cure ALD, Terry Wiener discovered that the curald.org domain was already registered despite there being no active website. Her search led her to a decade-old Cure ALD Facebook page tied to a California family. Terry Wiener eventually learned the family's son, Wyatt Zmrzel, had ALD and had died in an accident. His sister Sydney — a WWE competitor since 2022 and a former Los Angeles Rams cheerleader — and their mother also are ALD carriers.

Terry Wiener contacted the family members to ask whether they planned to restart the organization or would consider collaborating. They chose to remain involved but no longer wanted to run it, giving Terry Wiener's group its blessing to carry the mission forward and transferring the Cure ALD domain. Legally, the two organizations remain separate, with the original California foundation mostly dormant, while the Wieners continue the work the Zmrzels began.

"I'm so grateful that we were able to pass that torch and support Terry and her family in whatever ways they need," Luke said. "For us to get to support someone else in their journey through something that we've been through — it's really special."

Luke agreed to serve as Cure ALD's global ambassador, using her platform to raise awareness and support for the cause.

"I saw my mom do it my whole life, and now I'm getting to see Terry do it," she said. "It's a really devastating but beautiful thing to watch because you know she's doing everything she can to raise money and find people that can do this research. The way that Terry has really just gone head first and dove into this is really, really cool. I'm learning a ton from her, and I'm excited to be involved."

For Terry Wiener, finding a cure for ALD wouldn't just be a medical breakthrough but the fulfillment of a promise to her family and the many other ALD families she's met who live from MRI to MRI, fearing what might come next.

She paused to dab a tear from her eye.

"When you have a child, you imagine a future for them that includes health, happiness and success," she said, "but you also want to protect their future."

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Lawsuits

From Page A1

ment representatives, are part of a draft list of recommendations the committee is compiling.

The committee is expected to finalize a list of recommendations and release a full report this fall.

Eric Roth, an assistant chief administrative law judge for the Washington state Office of Administrative Hearings, said during a meeting Wednesday the committee is on a "tight timeline" to submit a draft of the report by Oct. 1.

Roth said ideas are not intended to be an endorsement, but are "brainstormed from the discussion."

Any modifications to state laws would need to be approved by the Legislature. The discussion comes as state and local governments increasingly pay more each year to settle claims of abuse or neglect.

Between July 1, 2025, and June 30, 2026, the state paid $537 million in settlements and court verdicts, with most of the cases originating from misconduct by the Department of Children, Youth and Families, which oversees child welfare, juvenile rehabilitation, early care and education and family support services.

Many of the lawsuits result from conduct that occurred decades ago, which state officials say are difficult to defend, since the length of time between the misconduct and the claim makes it challenging to corroborate information by talking to witnesses or examining documents.

The state paid $76 million in legal defense costs in these cases last fiscal year.

The amount the state government has paid has steadily increased in recent years. Between July 1, 2024, and June 30, 2025, the state paid nearly $500 million in payouts, up from the $100 million the state paid between July 1, 2020, and June 30, 2021.

Local jurisdictions have felt the strain, too. Last month, the Spokane Valley City Council agreed to a $3 million settlement with the family of an 18-year-old killed in a crash in 2022. Although the driver of the car was convicted of vehicular homicide, the family argued the city was at least partially liable because it maintained a dangerous road design.

A jury earlier this year awarded two former students and their parents a total of $17 million from the Mead School District for the hazing they suffered.

In a report last month, the Washington State Association of Counties found that claims to the submitted to the Washington Counties Risk Pool have increased by more than 60 percent since 2021.

"The costs are ultimately borne by local taxpayers either through higher taxes or reduced public services," the report states.

The report further found that the financial impact on counties in the state is "real and accelerating."

"Insurance premiums have risen hundreds of percent in just a few years. Some coverage is no longer available," the report states. "Small counties — those with the fewest resources — face the greatest proportional risk."

Part of the increase can be tied to a 1989 state Supreme Court decision that declared a rule capping damages awarded by a jury as unconstitutional, meaning there is no limit to how much can be awarded following a trial. According to the Washington State Association of Counties report, at least 33 states cap the damages that can be awarded in lawsuits against government entities.

LOTTERIES

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