
MEMORANDUM

TO: Honorable Members of the Speaker's Task Force on Foster Care

FROM: Chuck Price, President, Wisconsin County Human Service Association; Waupaca County Health and Human Services Director

Ray Przybelski, Vice President, Wisconsin County Human Service Association; Portage County Health and Human Services Director

Diane Cable, Co-Chair, Children, Youth, and Families Policy Advisory Committee, WCHSA; Eau Claire County Human Services Director

DATE: July 27, 2017

SUBJECT: County Comments on Foster Care

As a state-operated, county-administered human services system, 71 counties maintain responsibility for carrying out the work of the child welfare system, including foster care. In addition to providing child welfare services, counties also provide significant funding to the child welfare system in Wisconsin; 64 counties responding to a WCHSA survey indicated almost \$130,000,000 in collective county levy spending in 2016 for child protective services, almost double the amount of the state's Children and Families Allocation. WCHSA is grateful for the support of Governor Scott Walker and the Joint Finance Committee for an increase to the Children and Families Allocation in the proposed budget for 2017-19. We look forward to continuing to work with the legislature and the Department of Children and Families to identify and allocate adequate resources for the child welfare system in Wisconsin into the future.

The challenges which face county human services departments across the state are always significant, but what Wisconsin's child protective services system is currently dealing with is nothing short of unprecedented. There has been a 20 percent increase in Children in Need of Protection and Services (CHIPS) court petitions filed from 2012 to 2016. Almost half of Wisconsin counties are on track to file significantly increased numbers of CHIPS petitions in 2017, including 6 counties which by June 30 of this year had surpassed their total number of CHIPS petitions for 2016.

Counties report the cause for increasing numbers of CHIPS cases as tied directly to the heroin, opioid, and meth epidemics across the state; because of this, counties do not anticipate a decline in needed services for child protection, including foster care, any time in the near future. We are grateful for the commitment of Speaker Vos and the members of the Speaker's Task Force to explore ways in which we can work together to best serve the children and families of the State of Wisconsin.

Over the past several years, the foster care system has changed. Children and youth who are placed in out of home care present with significant complexities related to mental health/illness, as well as alcohol and drug issues impacting the child and/or adult caregivers. Our current foster care infrastructure has not kept up with the challenges to which county child welfare agencies are responding. The system is struggling to meet the complex needs of children and families, the needs of foster parents, and the needs of the social work staff coordinating the local foster care systems; this is occurring in all areas of the State.

WCHSA has identified four key areas which we bring forward for the consideration of the Task Force:

- Level of care. We need to focus on providing and connecting children and youth to foster parents who can meet and manage the needs and level of need to care for the child/youth. The percentage of children entering the foster care system who are themselves or have a parent diagnosed with mental health issues and/or alcohol or drug issues has significantly increased across the State. The complexity of these cases:
 - Contributes to longer length of stay out of home;
 - Impacts Kinship Care placements not prepared to manage complex situations, including caring for drug addicted babies, children with mental health needs, behavioral presentations from traumatic experiences, and substance abuse
- Lack of capacity. The capacity to develop new foster care resources has diminished across the state, resulting in:
 - A lack of foster care beds;
 - Counties placing children in treatment foster care homes when need does not dictate that level of care;
 - A lack of resources to meet the complex needs of some children is contributing to the placement of children out of state;
 - Increased pressure on county resources for implementation and utilization of tools and assessments for foster care placements, as required.
- Changing and unmet needs of foster parents. Resources and support for foster parents do not sufficiently align with the needs of children needing placement, including engagement with families, navigating the court and legal system, being prepared to financially respond to the needs of a child/youth, and engaging with children/youth/parents who are significantly traumatized. We encourage review of:
 - Statutory language which states both foster parents may not be employed away from the home on a full-time, part-time or seasonal basis without written approval of the licensing agency. In an economy where two parents may need to work to adequately provide for their household, this requirement excludes a number of otherwise qualified and willing families from participating in the foster care system.
 - Processes to engage with systems that can support foster parents, such requirements for accessing support for child care.

Wisconsin County Human Service Association

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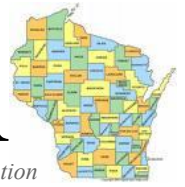
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WCHSA



Wisconsin County Human Service Association

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- Child Welfare caseload standards. The caseload of child welfare workers has significantly increased across the state, which contributes to the stress on the foster care system, the operations of the local child welfare systems, and social workers and case workers. To that effect:
 - With the exception of Milwaukee County, Wisconsin does not have an established child welfare caseload standard. Child welfare agencies are held responsible for carrying out mandated responsibilities of the Child Welfare Standards without the delineation of a caseload standard and without the adequate resources to support the system.
 - Research indicates that caseworker/social worker turnover and high caseloads lead to longer stays in out of home placements for children, resulting in poorer outcomes.

The stress on Wisconsin's foster care system, and the child welfare system as a whole, is leading to less than desirable outcomes. To alleviate the stress on the system and to provide better outcomes to Wisconsin children and families, we would recommend:

- Developing and funding an appropriate staff caseload. The more time workers can spend with the family engaged in the foster care system to reach desired goals, the sooner a determination can be made regarding capacity to parent, and the sooner the family will be able to reunify or gain permanence in some other setting.
- Increasing the In-Home Safety Service program. Even with the proposed expansion of this program in the current budget, it may be imperative to further expand this resource to all counties. This service can serve to prevent foster care placements altogether or shorten the duration of the foster care placement.
- Providing additional support to foster parents. While this could include several different approaches, our recommendation is the creation of a workgroup with representation from elected officials, state, foster parents, and counties that could identify and address specific issues with the foster care system. These could include issues around recruitment, reimbursement, initial placement costs, expansion/creation of caregiver support programs for foster parents, and a possible tax break for foster families. The resulting approach to address system needs could be county by county, regional, or statewide.
- Providing additional support for staffing the county role in foster care coordination and support.

Thank you for considering our comments and recommendations. We look forward to working with the Task Force moving forward.