



TO: The Honorable Members of the Assembly Committee on Children and Families

FROM: Emily Coddington, Associate Director

DATE: October 14, 2021

RE: **AB 412 – Foster Parents’ Bill of Rights**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding AB 412, which seeks to establish a bill of rights for Wisconsin foster parents. We appreciate the bill author’s acknowledgement that more can and should be done to honor those who care for children and families in our state. Relative and fictive kin caregivers, as well as foster and adoptive parents, all deserve support and recognition for the work they do. They deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, and to be provided with information and opportunities to be heard. They deserve to be valued members of the team, and to receive compensation commensurate with their time and dedication.

WAFCA is a statewide association that represents nearly fifty child and family serving agencies and advocates for the more than 200,000 individuals and families that they impact each year. Our members’ services include family, group and individual counseling; substance use treatment; crisis intervention; outpatient mental health therapy; and foster care and adoption programs, among others. Many of our member agencies license foster homes and facilitate both public and private adoptions, so ensuring those they serve are respected and supported is of utmost importance.

The principles outlined in AB 412 generally align well with Wisconsin’s Foster Parent Handbook¹ and administrative rules, and there is a desire among WAFCA members for these concepts to be more deeply embedded in statewide practice. There is concern, however, that incorporating the language into state statute may not be an effective tool to achieve this end and may generate confusion or conflict between current law and administrative rules and the rights proposed here. On a more practical level, embedding this language in statute would inhibit our ability to keep a foster parent bill of rights updated and aligned with current best practice, open to periodic review and amendments.

At the heart of the issue seems to be a desire to ensure shared power and decision-making, which will only come with true collaboration among the team members entrusted with a child’s care. For this reason, WAFCA recommends an amendment to this proposal directing the Department of Children and Families to collaborate with foster parents, birth parents, other caregivers, youth, county and tribal child welfare agencies, and licensing/placing agencies to create a foster parents’ bill of rights for Wisconsin. In addition, we would support the allocation of resources for training to effectively implement these values

¹ Retrieved from: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/fostercare/handbook>

in practice so that the workers who have the most contact with foster parents grow in their understanding of their role and actively engage them as core members of a child's team.

WAFCA also believes that for the vision of the bill to truly be accomplished, structural and financial changes are needed within our foster care system. As our member agencies have prepared for the new expectations under the federal Family First Act, we continue to gather input regarding the system changes needed to improve recruitment and retention of the highly skilled foster families we need. The following are examples of policy changes suggested by our members in consultation with their foster and kin families that the legislature could consider when taking steps to improve the experience of, and honor, foster parents, and other caregivers including relative caregivers ("in-home caregivers").

- Reimburse in-home caregivers according to the type of service they are expected to provide.
- Establish a baseline that in-home caregivers serving children with complex needs are not expected to hold other employment.
- Remove the current rate determination process that may result in a decrease in a foster care rate when a child has improved.
- Provide BadgerCare+ coverage for in-home caregivers who need it.
- Create more resources for childcare, respite, training, mentoring, and group support. Provide support, training, and resources for building relationships with biological family.
- Create advanced caregiver training to encourage highly trained caregivers and areas of specialization to better serve youth with complex needs.
- Have children in out-of-home care identified as a priority services population. There should be no waitlist for children in out-of-home care who need mental health services, including crisis services and respite.

These systemic changes for foster parents and other in-home caregivers would bring us one step closer to responding to the federal and state transformations currently underway.

As always, we appreciate the opportunity to share our thoughts with the Committee and value the ongoing commitment of the legislature to lift up issues related to foster care. We would be happy to work with bill authors should revisions be considered, and/or to discuss the additional recommendations for systemic change provided.