



TO: The Honorable Members of the Assembly Committee on Children and Families
FROM: Kathy Markeland, Associate Director
DATE: January 17, 2018
RE: **WAFCA Support for Foster Forward Proposals**

On behalf of the Wisconsin Association of Family & Children's Agencies (WAFCA), thank you for the opportunity to share our support for the five proposals before the Committee today as a result of the work of the Speaker's Task Force on Foster Care.

WAFCA is a statewide association that represents over fifty child and family serving agencies and leaders in the field and advocates for the more than 250,000 individuals and families that they serve each year. Our members' services include family, group and individual counseling; substance use treatment; crisis intervention; outpatient mental health therapy; and foster care programs, among many others.

Over the past several months, WAFCA has appreciated the opportunity to work closely with the Speaker's Task Force as they developed a range of proposals to improve systems of care for Wisconsin's children and families. WAFCA and our members agencies urged the Task Force to focus on prevention, earlier intervention and strategies for supporting parents. The more we can do to help build healthy families, the greater the chances that children will be safe and secure at home. In fact, the Task Force heard significant testimony on the value of investing in families sooner to prevent child abuse and neglect and how supporting parents in a variety of ways throughout the CHIPS process is the best way to move children to permanence more quickly and reduce trauma.

2017 Assembly Bill 785 – Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Grants

WAFCA strongly supports efforts to expand earlier intervention strategies with families and supports the funding provided in AB 785 which increases Wisconsin's investment in prevention services. The flexible grant dollars provided in AB 785 will foster further innovation in services and enable additional expansion of proven strategies such as home visiting, which keeps children safe and nurtured with their parents and diverts at-risk families from a path to future child welfare system involvement.

In 2016 more than 1500 caregivers were served in federally funded home visiting programs across the state. Additional families were served in home visiting programs funded by community and local dollars, however, we know that we are only reaching a small percentage of those who could benefit. AB 785 continues Wisconsin moving in the right direction to further secure support for these smart investments in family stability.

Assembly Bill 783 – Child Welfare Caseload Study

The study proposed in AB 783 will provide invaluable information to help the state improve support for county child welfare services. The Task Force heard compelling testimony regarding the strained child welfare workforce, which has become even more overloaded by the influx of children from families with

drug-related concerns. As caseloads expand, intake workers and case managers are more susceptible to burnout and turnover escalates. A 2004 study of caseworker turnover in Milwaukee showed a direct correlation between caseworker turnover and a child achieving timely permanence. In fact, the data was stark showing that 74.5% of children entering care in a calendar year who had one caseworker during that time exited to permanence. Only 17.5% of children with two case managers exited to permanence in that same year.

A strained case management workforce also negatively impacts our foster home recruitment and retention efforts. One of the primary concerns expressed by foster parents is lack of support while a child is placed in their home. When caseworkers are stretched, they do not have the time to sit with foster parents and support them in the critical work they do. Foster parents are the best recruiters for new homes – when we lose one quality foster home, we lose many potential homes, as well.

With regard to the composition of the Task Force, we recommend that one or more representatives from the private ongoing case management agencies in Milwaukee be included among the appointees to represent DMCPs, given the significant role of these agencies in the system.

2017 Assembly Bill 787- Funding for Grants to Support Foster Parents and Foster Children

WAFCAs that are licensed by the state to serve as child placing agencies are key partners in the recruitment and support of foster parents across the state. Our members collaborate with the state and counties to continually identify and develop new foster care resources and ensure that our state has a full continuum of quality homes to best match the needs of children coming into care. The grant funding proposed in AB 787 would be a valuable resource to support all of our licensed homes in some of the following ways:

AB 787 could help fund support for foster children. While the monthly foster care rate may be adjusted and negotiated with a county to address the special needs of each individual child, there are times when county budgets are stretched. AB 787 would provide a secondary outlet to address additional foster care related expenses. An example of such expenses would be supporting driver's education and insurance coverage for a foster youth.

AB 787 could provide additional respite. Respite is an important support for foster parents that helps to prevent burn out. While counties are not mandated to provide respite for their Level 2 foster homes, they make efforts to support this service within their limited budgets. The funding available under AB 787 could be resource to expand access to qualified respite support.

AB 787 could expand access to advanced training. CPAs are responsible for providing initial and ongoing training for their licensed foster homes. Many of the more experienced treatment foster parents would benefit from enhanced training opportunities through universities or national conferences. Counties and private agencies are often not able to afford these advanced training opportunities, which would improve the skills of quality homes, validate their professional contribution to children's treatment and develop their capacity to serve as mentors and teachers within our system.

AB 787 could support foster parent recognition. Counties and CPAs across the state look for opportunities to celebrate their homes and make their providers feel valued. Some agencies do this through recreational opportunities or parties or small gifts/incentives for length of service. In tight budget times, these incentives are frequently the first item to be eliminated. AB 787 would provide a welcome opportunity to say "thank you" to our foster homes.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear in support of the "Foster Forward" package before you today. We look forward to working with the Committee to advance these proposals.