



TO: The Honorable Members of the Senate Committee on Human Services, Children and Families

FROM: Emily Coddington, Associate Director

DATE: April 27, 2021

RE: **Support for SB 161 – Certification of Qualified Residential Treatment Programs**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Senate Bill 161, which will permit the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to certify a congregate care setting, such as a shelter care facility, group home, or residential care center for children and youth (RCCs), as a Qualified Residential Treatment Program (QRTP).

WAFCA is a statewide association that represents over forty child and family serving agencies, and advocates for the more than 200,000 individuals and families they serve each year. Our members' services include foster care programs; shelters, group homes, and residential care centers; crisis intervention; outpatient mental health therapy; and individual, family and group counseling, among others. As partners in the state's continuum of care, WAFCA members are committed to providing quality, effective treatment services, partnering with individuals to achieve their full potential.

Since the enactment of the Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First), WAFCA has actively worked with members and other stakeholders to assess what these changes will mean for Wisconsin. Our state, like others, has struggled to provide a comprehensive service array that prevents children and families from progressing further into the system than necessary. In addition, our continuum of care to serve children and families through the child welfare system (child protection services and youth justice), including those placed in out-of-home care, has been insufficient to address the complex needs of these families. The issue has become more apparent in recent years as the number of children placed out of state for residential care and treatment has trended upwards, exceeding 60 children in 2019.<sup>1</sup>

Family First provides resources to ensure better prevention services are available within our state and also presents us with an opportunity to strengthen our continuum of care by creating this new therapeutic setting to better serve our young people in need of more intensive treatment. We believe that enabling DCF to certify a QRTP within congregate care settings will provide a more robust continuum for Wisconsin youth needing placement, including those currently placed out of state. In addition, the creation of QRTPs will provide a way for Wisconsin to continue claiming Title IV-E federal match on some of the costs associated with out-of-home care placement.

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/reports/pdf/ohc.pdf>, (Pg. 3.16, Figure 21)

In voicing our support for SB 161, we would also offer some considerations for the Committee. First, we would like to emphasize the importance of keeping this bill in its current form and passing it quickly. Family First is supposed to go “live” in Wisconsin this October which leaves limited time for providers to adjust their programs to meet new support and service standards. While many providers have taken initial steps to modify their programs in light of federal requirements, any further delay in this legislation and subsequent rule making could place Wisconsin in jeopardy of forgoing federal matching on some congregate care placements.

Secondly, growing our service array, which includes having various out-of-home care placement resources for the children who are determined to need them, is incredibly important in keeping children close to home. In the continuum Wisconsin needs to ensure each child receives the right service at the right time, QRTPs become part of the solution. Other types of non-QRTP placement resources will continue to be needed, especially during the transition, to ensure more children do not end up being placed out of state. While not all group care settings need to be certified QRTP in order for federal reimbursement to occur, Wisconsin does need QRTP capacity.

Capacity has declined throughout the years and we cannot afford to have it decline further. Currently, DCF licenses 19 RCCs and 63 group homes who accept placement of children in need of protection and services. According to information obtained through the DCF Rate Regulation Advisory Committee, in 2019, the average number of children and youth served in these RCCs on a daily basis was 440; for group homes the average was 240. WAFCA anticipates that all of Wisconsin’s RCCs that serve children in the child welfare system will seek to certify as QRTPs, and that some, but not all, of Wisconsin’s group homes will seek to certify as QRTPs. While the number of children placed in both congregate care settings has steadily declined over the past decade, there is still a need for these settings to continue serving children, as well as additional resources to serve those with complex care needs.

Being planful and inclusive when creating this type of service will be key to successful implementation. The creation of QRTPs has implications for children, families, counties, tribes, providers and the community at-large. Relying on the expertise and continued commitment of those in our current out-of-home care array - our relative caregivers and foster parents, youth care workers, group home operators, and residential service providers – will help ensure we build what is needed. As long-serving partners in Wisconsin’s child and family serving systems, our members are “all in” on increasing investments in prevention and early intervention to build out an effective service array to help more children stay safely at home. We also have a responsibility to sustain a broad continuum of resources. Wisconsin will continue to have some children who need an out-of-home resource, families with complex trauma, and adolescents facing serious emotional and mental health challenges. Passing this bill will enable us to get to work on this important piece of the broader system transition envisioned for our state.

We are optimistic about the future of Wisconsin’s child welfare system and our ability to work collaboratively with all stakeholders to develop a better continuum of care and thank you for your support and consideration.