



TO: The Honorable Members of the Assembly Committee on Children and Families
FROM: Kathy Markeland, Executive Director
DATE: December 18, 2019
RE: **Support for AB 643 – Certification of Qualified Residential Treatment Programs**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Assembly Bill 643, which will permit the Department of Children and Families to create a certification for a Qualified Residential Treatment Program (QRTP) in current congregate care settings such as a shelter care facility, group home, or residential care center for children and youth.

WAFCA is a statewide association that represents over forty child and family serving agencies, and advocates for the more than 225,000 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, helping all individuals achieve their full potential.

We appreciate the Committee's interest in the Family First Prevention Services Act (herein, Family First) and what it will mean for some of the most vulnerable children and families in Wisconsin. For too long our state 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 clinical residential care and treatment has trended upwards, exceeding 50 children in 2017.¹

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 a clinical setting that will allow us to better serve our young people in need of the most intensive treatment. We believe that enabling the Department of Children and Families 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 within the state will provide a way for Wisconsin to recoup some of the costs associated with out-of-home care placement.

¹ Retrieved from: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/reports/pdf/ohc.pdf>

In our support of AB 643, we have a few key considerations for the Committee. First, we would like to emphasize the importance of growing our service array, which includes having various out-of-home care placement resources for the children who are determined to need them. In the continuum Wisconsin needs to ensure each child receives the right service at the right time, a QRTP becomes 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.

Secondly, it is crucial that Wisconsin understand the need for the QRTP placement resources and costs associated with operating a quality clinical program. Expanding capacity should be based on need, and the establishment of this new level of care within our continuum presents us with an opportunity to revisit our financing mechanisms. Our current congregate care system is funded through daily rate payments, a funding system that becomes even more challenging as expectations shift to higher levels of clinical services and shortened lengths of stay for youth placed in these settings.

Finally, we believe it is important to be playful and inclusive when establishing this type of service. The creation of QRTPs has implications for children, families, counties, tribes, providers and the community at-large. Ensuring individuals affected by the creation of such a program have ample opportunity to assist in its development will only produce a more solid outcome for all.

We are especially optimistic about the future of Wisconsin's child welfare system at this time and thank you for your support and consideration.