



TO: The Honorable Members of the Assembly Committee on AB 239

FROM: Linda A. Hall, Executive Director

DATE: April 18, 2017

RE: **Support for Assembly Bill 239 – Refundable Tax Credit for Youth in Transition**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Assembly Bill 239 to provide additional support for youth as they transition out of Wisconsin's child welfare or child disability systems.

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; chemical dependency treatment; crisis intervention; outpatient mental health therapy; and foster care programs, among others. For many years, our member agencies have focused significant attention on the needs of the youth in their care who "age out" of the foster care system.

Youth exiting Wisconsin's foster care system without permanency face a range of challenges as they move into their adult lives. Like all young people, children in foster care need support – both financial and social – as they take their first steps toward independence. However, unlike their peers, youth aging out of the foster care system face unique obstacles that can make it more difficult as they seek to find their footing through their first tentative steps on the path to adulthood.

Over the past decade, researchers and lawmakers across the country have worked to develop stronger policies to support youth aging out of care. Former foster youth in Wisconsin participated in one of the most significant national studies, which has been frequently cited across the country as a basis for policies to increase services and supports for these young people. The *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth* tracked youth over nearly a decade. Some of the findings included that former foster youth:

- Are far less likely than their same age peers to graduate or earn a GED and significantly less likely to be enrolled in higher education;
- Are more likely to experience homelessness; and
- Are twice as likely as their same age peers to experience depression and physical health problems.

It is clear from the research and from the direct experience of our member providers that due to trauma and significant disruptions in their home and educational experiences, youth in foster care at ages 18 and 19 are not developmentally ready for independence. In fact, more recent data on Wisconsin foster youth shows that fewer than 10% of foster youth have any work experience by age 17.

There is some good news.

In recent years, Wisconsin has taken significant steps to address the challenges faced by this population including:

- Extending Medicaid coverage to the age of 26;
- Providing an option for youth with special needs to stay in out-of-home care beyond the age of 18; and
- Facilitating opportunities for youth in care to participate in normal life activities like employment and extracurriculars that help youth develop skills and prepare to live independently.

In addition, the population of foster youth who have aged out of the system is declining thanks to statewide efforts to increase permanence. In 2009, the number of youth aging out was 491 and, despite increases in the child welfare caseload over the past few years, the number youth aging out has continued to drop to a new low of 279 in 2016. AB 239 proposes a targeted investment in this small population of youth who are in the workforce and building their skills.

The state investment proposed under AB 239 will add to the supportive resources available to youth who are in transition and help them in their journey toward greater independence.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We look forward to working with the Committee to advance this legislation.