



TO: Chairman Joel Kleefisch and Members of the Legislative Council Study Committee on Adoption Disruption and Dissolution

FROM: Kathy Markeland, Associate Director

DATE: December 12, 2014

RE: Draft Committee Proposals and Recommendations for Enhanced Post-Adoption Resources

On behalf of the Wisconsin Association of Family & Children's Agencies (WAFCA), thank you for your commitment of time and expertise over these past months as you have engaged the complicated family, systems and policy issues surrounding adoption and post-adoption family stability.

WAFCA is a member association working to improve the lives of children and families in Wisconsin. Our member agencies provide a wide array of prevention and supportive services including adoption, foster care, in-home support, counseling and mental health treatment.

Our members include agencies that facilitate international and domestic adoptions, as well as, facilitating adoptions from the public child welfare system through the state Special Needs Adoption Program. Three of our members are under contract with the state to operate regional Post-Adoption Resource Centers (PARCs).

We have closely followed the Committee's work in recent months and appreciated the thoughtful discussion of the issues and earnest efforts to develop policy responses that promote the best interests of children. We are generally supportive of the draft proposals considered by the Committee to date. Many of the proposals, including the promotion of SAFE-like standards for home studies, increasing the training hours for pre-adoptive families, and providing legal avenues for adopted children to stay connected to biological family align with best practices in the adoption field.

We believe that the Committee's proposal to improve data collection is especially valuable. By requiring re-adoption in Wisconsin and reporting of all public and private international and domestic adoptions to the regional PARCs, for the first time the state will have a reasonably reliable source of information to enable us to further our understanding of the successes and challenges of Wisconsin's adoptive families.

The focus of our communication today is to advocate for the expansion of post-adoptive services. Based on our members' experience, and building on the presentation of Susan Livingston Smith of the Donaldson Adoption Institute, we believe there are significant new investments that could be made to improve Wisconsin's post-adoption services and support continuum. As reported to the Committee by PARC representatives, there has been no increase in funding for the PARCs since 1999. The PARCs

provide a number of support services to families, but the limited funding does not allow for the depth of programming and outreach that could most positively impact these families.

One strength of Wisconsin's PARC design is that services are made available to all adoptive families. In addition, even with limited resources, the PARCs have successfully leveraged private funds through grants and other fundraising to facilitate information and referral services, a 24-hour hotline, support groups for families and youth, training for families and promotion of community awareness. However, with a relatively modest increase in resources, Wisconsin could work through the PARCs and other partners to significantly strengthen the supports available to post-adoptive families.

Specifically WAFCA supports the addition of resources to:

1. Enable post-adoption resource centers to conduct home visits and maintain more rigorous outreach systems;
2. Support further development of an adoption-competent workforce; and
3. Provide access to direct services and resources that will incentivize families to reach out for assistance before their situation reaches crisis levels.

1. In-home services and advocacy support for post-adoptive families. WLC 0029/2 proposes to increase the expectation for PARCs to connect in-person with families after adoption finalization. While current resources provided to PARCs would not enable this level of service, we strongly support this new outreach expectation along with adequate funding to support necessary staffing. Further, given what is known about the onset of challenges for families as children approach adolescence, we would support establishment of the additional expectation for outreach and visit efforts at critical developmental stages, particularly for children and families facing higher risk factors at the time of adoption.

As family needs intensify, there should be resources made available for families to obtain advocates and case management support. While the majority of children adopted through the public child welfare system have health coverage through Medicaid, the family's ability to access and navigate appropriate resources and services may be limited. Many adoptive families are foster home conversions. When these families transition, professional supports drop away. While this is appropriate in many instances, there are some cases where children would benefit from the continued availability of case manager/navigator support.

The six PARCs are currently funded at an annual rate of \$472,800. In 2013, Wisconsin court records show more than 1,100 adoptions, 677 of which were adoptions from the child welfare system. Given this volume, we assume each PARC would require the addition of, at a minimum, a half-time employee to meet the new in-person visitation expectation.

We recommend funding to support the addition of a full-time employee at each PARC to grant each center sufficient capacity to provide additional in-home visits and case management assistance to higher risk families.

Proposed additional PARC investment: \$450,000 to add 6 FTE statewide for a total annual PARC budget just over \$922,000.

2. Building greater adoption-competency in our treatment systems and workforce. Using the data from the Donaldson report¹ as a basis for calculation, we assume that nearly 4000 adopted children and youth in Wisconsin between the ages of 2-17 are engaging in or in need of mental health services currently. Many of these children are experiencing access issues due to regional resource limits, limits on mental health professionals accepting Medicaid clients and limited numbers of adoption-competent providers generally.

A number of states fund training and certification programs to promote development of adoption-competent providers in their state. While all of Wisconsin's PARCs currently provide support groups and training targeted to adoptive families, there is insufficient capacity to serve as an effective resource to develop the skills of providers and to "certify" or validate the credentials of providers who may seek to serve adoptive families.

A new training investment could take the form of a state-sponsored certification effort like the ones in New Jersey and Missouri, among others. Alternately, a training program could be organized and funded through the PARCs, similar to the annual training series sponsored in Connecticut. This training investment would be complemented by a managed, online directory of providers who demonstrate adoption-competence through documented training, certification or practice experience.

Proposed initial annual training investment: \$150,000

3. Access to Direct Services and Resources. In October WAFCA surveyed members regarding children in their services with an adoption history. The survey results (attached) mirror the national data on the challenges experienced by some of our adoptive families. While many families benefit from referral services, support groups and trainings, there are some families that need more ongoing, intensive support. Our brief survey identified 80 children who have returned to out-of-home care. Whether the families of these 80 children sought help along the way is unknown. However, we do know that the future for these 80 children now that they have re-entered foster care is precarious.

Families working with the chronic emotional, mental and behavioral needs of their adoptive children need respite and access to intensive treatment services that may be difficult to find, expensive and often not funded through insurance. The majority of parents who face these circumstances want to continue parenting their child, but when they can't afford to access the treatment, the system leaves them with few options but to relinquish custody. A number of states provide a pool of funds to support adopted children presenting with high intensity needs. While DCF reports that financial assistance may be made available to families on a case-by-case basis, such support is not part of an established program, nor is it clearly promoted to families as a resource. Dedicating funds to support the intensive needs of these most at-risk adoptive families could provide greater incentive for families to reach out earlier for support.

Proposed initial annual allocation: \$1,000,000

¹ *Supporting and Preserving Adoptive Families: Profiles of Publicly Funded Post-Adoption Services*, Donaldson Adoption Institute, April 2014. <http://adoptioninstitute.org/publications/supporting-and-preserving-adoptive-families-profiles-of-publicly-funded-post-adoption-services/>

In considering the proposals currently under review by the Study Committee and the WAFCA recommendations contained in this memo, it is important to note that the new federal Prevent Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (HR 4980) will complement some of these proposed initiatives. The federal act delineates new requirements regarding data tracking of adoption disruptions. It also establishes new requirements for states to channel adoption dollars to post-adoption services.

Many of the enhanced post-adoption services we are proposing here may be appropriate additions to the existing PARC network. We acknowledge however that some services, such as workforce training support, may be more appropriately managed through a different program or partnership. Should the Legislature endorse new post-adoption supports, stakeholders should be consulted regarding the most efficient and effective means for delivering these enhanced services to post-adoptive families.

This past November, Wisconsin joined with states across the country in celebrating National Adoption Month. As the Study Committee completes its work, it is important to acknowledge that there is indeed a great deal to celebrate. The majority of families who embrace children through adoption are forming forever families that will succeed and thrive. However, for those families who will face intensive challenges, we can and should do more to support their stability.

We thank you for your efforts to do something more. We look forward to continuing collaborations with the various stakeholders represented on the Study Committee as these proposals advance to the Legislature for consideration in the coming session.



Executive Summary
Survey on Adoption History of Children in Out-of-Home Care and Other Services
 Wisconsin Association of Family & Children’s Agencies - October 2014

Background: In October 2014, WAFCA sent a brief 10-question survey to all member agencies. The survey asked providers to look at their current clients and identify any children or youth in their care with an adoption history.

31 programs operating in 19 agencies across the state responded. While a small sample, the data reported below paints a picture of the prevalence of needs and demonstrates the importance of further data and research on these post-adoptive families.

Data Overview

The 31 programs that responded were **servicing a total of 1805 children.**

The program services represented included:

- Foster Care (9 programs)
- Residential Care (7)
- Group Home (7)
- Outpatient Mental Health (3)
- In-home services (3)
- Alt. Education/Day School (3)
- Day Treatment (2)
- Respite Services (2)
- Safety Services (1)
- Intensive Case Management and Coordination (1)

Agencies were asked to identify the number of children in their programs with a **known adoption history.** While a few agencies responded that they did not track this information, respondents identified **134** children in their programs who were adopted. Given the 1805 children in services identified in the sample this means one in thirteen children in services was adopted.

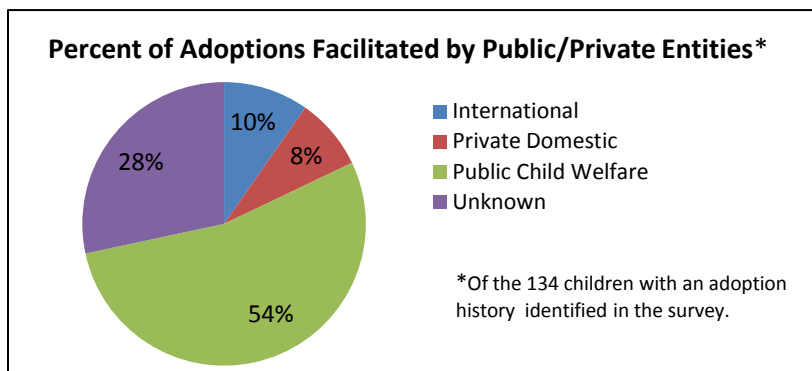


Based on WAFCA Survey 10/14

Tracking Adoption Status

16 programs reported that they collect adoption history as part of their intake process for new clients.

11 programs document the information in the client file when the information is learned by the clinician/team. 4 programs reported that they do not document adoption history.

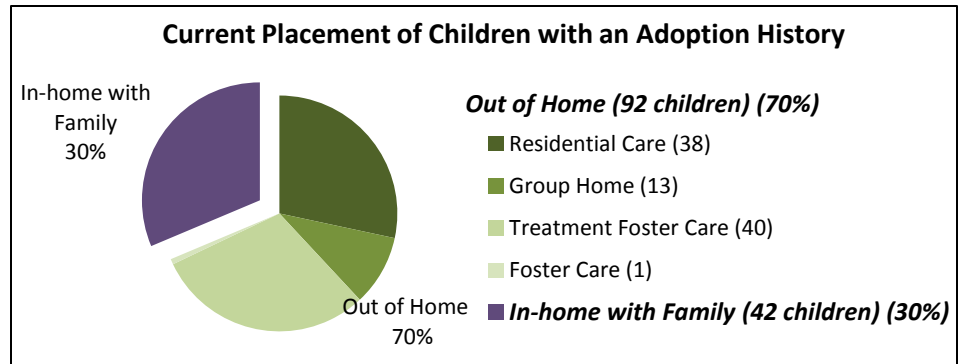


Of the 134 children in services with an adoption history, **more than 50% were adopted through the public child welfare system.** For 28% of the children, the source of the adoption was unknown.

Ages , Placement and Risk of Permanent Disruption

88% of the children in services with an adoption history were **between the ages of 11-20 years**. This is consistent with national data showing an increase in behavioral and mental health needs in adolescence and sharp increase in re-entry of children into the child welfare system beginning at age 11.

Of the 134 children with an adoption history identified in the survey, **92 were in an out-of-home placement.**



60%

Of children with an adoption history are at risk of not reunifying with their adoptive families

Based on WAFCA Survey 10/14

Programs were asked to identify the number of adopted children in their care who were at-risk of not reunifying with their families. The survey respondents identified **80 children (60%) who were at risk of not reunifying.**

Discussion

The data shared in this summary are the result of a brief, voluntary survey. The survey asked programs to respond based on known information about children currently in care. Therefore, the information reflects the “point in time” experience of a few dozen programs in the state. Given the survey design, it would be imprudent to extrapolate this information beyond the reporting entities.

In spite of the limitations, the data aligns with national findings regarding the re-entry of adopted children into out-of-home care and the prevalence of mental health needs among adopted adolescents.

In addition, while this data sample is small, it is noteworthy that a handful of programs are currently serving more than 80 adopted youth who are at risk of not reunifying with their families. National data tells us that in the absence of reunification these youth are far more likely to “age out” of foster care.

This survey was intended to generate a picture beyond the anecdotal reports of the challenges that children and families face after adoption. Universal data collection efforts are needed to develop a comprehensive understanding of the needs and the gaps in the support systems for post-adoptive families.

However small in scale, this survey identifies nearly 100 adopted children in Wisconsin who are currently in an out-of-home placement. Many of these children were formerly in foster care, were adopted and are now at-risk of losing a second family. The financial costs to the state are significant; the long-term social and emotional costs for these children are immeasurable.

Voices from the Field

Survey respondents were invited to share any additional comments or observations that they had regarding the children with an adoption history in their care. The following is a sampling of comments.

“Adoptive parents often comment that if they had really good family therapy services available to them in their region of the state, the failed adoption might have been prevented. I continue to hear that adoptive families do not have the resources and support they need post adoption.”

“It seems that the intensive, specialized needs related to attachment are not as much of a struggle for adoptive families until years after adoption [is finalized], which is often times when any aid and support has been long terminated.”

“This is a snapshot of who we have in care today. At any given time we have four or more youth [in our program] who have been adopted. The adopted families that we have served often talk about feeling like they were left on their own to deal with problems of children they adopted.”

“Most of the children currently in placement came to us at 15+ years of age. The permanency plan for these youth is long-term foster care. Parental rights have not been terminated on the adoptive parents, but the parents seem unwilling to work towards reunification. “Failed” adoptions appear to have extreme emotions of bitterness, betrayal, and rejection more so than children removed from biological families.”

“We often serve youth with sexual, acting-out issues against a sibling in their adoptive home. The adoptive parents rarely accept these youth back if/when treatment is successful. The adoptive parents also often do not terminate their parental rights and counties rarely do an involuntary TPR so these kids do not become available for another adoption.”

“There is a greater need for wraparound supportive services for adoptive families, especially with at-risk youth.”

WAFCA is a member association that works to improve the lives of families and children in Wisconsin. Representing over 50 child and family serving agencies and leaders in the field, WAFCA advocates for our members and the more than 225,000 individuals and families that they serve each year.