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Details: Reggie Bicha

(FORM UPDATED: 08/11/2010)

**WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE ...  
PUBLIC HEARING - COMMITTEE RECORDS**

**2009-10**

(session year)

**Senate**

(Assembly, Senate or Joint)

**Committee on ... Children & Families & Workforce  
Development (SC-CFWD)**

**COMMITTEE NOTICES ...**

- Committee Reports ... **CR**
- Executive Sessions ... **ES**
- Public Hearings ... **PH**

**INFORMATION COLLECTED BY COMMITTEE FOR AND AGAINST PROPOSAL**

- Appointments ... **Appt** (w/Record of Comm. Proceedings)
- Clearinghouse Rules ... **CRule** (w/Record of Comm. Proceedings)
- Hearing Records ... bills and resolutions (w/Record of Comm. Proceedings)  
(**ab** = Assembly Bill)                      (**ar** = Assembly Resolution)                      (**ajr** = Assembly Joint Resolution)  
(**sb** = Senate Bill)                              (**sr** = Senate Resolution)                              (**sjr** = Senate Joint Resolution)
- Miscellaneous ... **Misc**

## Senate

### Record of Committee Proceedings

#### **Committee on Children and Families and Workforce Development**

**Bicha, Reggie**, of Eau Claire, as Secretary of the Department of Children and Families, to serve for the term ending at the pleasure of the Governor.

January 06, 2009      Referred to Committee on Children and Families and Workforce Development.

March 17, 2009      **PUBLIC HEARING HELD**

Present:    (5)    Senators Jauch, Lassa, Vinehout, Kedzie and Hopper.  
Absent:    (0)    None.

#### Appearances For

- Reggie Bicha, Madison — Secretary, Department of Children and Families
- Steve Blake, Oxford — Wisconsin Fathers for Children and Families

#### Appearances Against

- None.

#### Appearances for Information Only

- None.

#### Registrations For

- Jim Doyle, Madison — Governor

#### Registrations Against

- None.

#### Registrations for Information Only

- None.

March 17, 2009      **EXECUTIVE SESSION HELD**

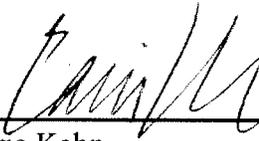
Present:    (5)    Senators Jauch, Lassa, Vinehout, Kedzie and Hopper.  
Absent:    (0)    None.

Moved by Senator Lassa, seconded by Senator Vinehout that  
**Bicha, Reggie** be recommended for confirmation.

Ayes: (5) Senators Jauch, Lassa, Vinehout, Kedzie and  
Hopper.

Noes: (0) None.

CONFIRMATION RECOMMENDED, Ayes 5, Noes 0

  
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Carrie Kahn  
Committee Clerk



WISCONSIN COUNCIL ON

**children  
& families**

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March 17, 2009

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To: Members of the Senate Committee on Children and Families and  
Workforce Development, Senator Bob Jauch, Chair  
From: Charity Eleson, Executive Director   
Re: Appointment of Reggie Bicha for Secretary of the Department of  
Children and Families

I am writing to ask you to support the confirmation today of Reggie Bicha as the first Secretary of the Department of Children and Families. As the state's only statewide, multi-issue child and family policy advocacy organization, the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families was an early supporter of the creation of the new Department of Children and Families. We see great value in a state agency that integrates services across the spectrum of child and family needs from safety to economic security.

The new department needs a leader who is able to think and manage strategically, possesses an understanding and compassion for children and families who are at risk, and has a vision for communities where families are able to find what they need to help their children thrive. Reggie Bicha is that leader. He brings a combination of social work, administrative and policy experience that will be valuable to the state and valuable to Wisconsin families.

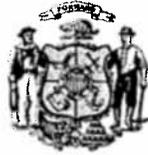
I ask you to endorse his appointment today.

Thank you.



Jim Doyle  
Governor

Reggie Bicha  
Secretary



**State of Wisconsin**  
Department of Children and Families

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March 17, 2009

TO: Committee on Children, Families and Workforce Development

FROM: Reggie Bicha  
Secretary, Department of Children and Families

RE: Confirmation Hearing

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Good afternoon.

It is an honor and unimagined privilege to be before you today. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss my role as Secretary of the Department of Children and Families and for your consideration of my confirmation for this important post.

A year ago, the Department of Children and Families did not exist. At this time last year we were developing an organizational structure, setting goals, interviewing new leadership, speaking with and listening to hundreds of stakeholders across Wisconsin. Our offices weren't yet under construction. And, we didn't even have DCF stationery, let alone a website.

Having been appointed by Governor Doyle to lead the transition to create the Department of Children and Families, the transition team and I traveled around the state to meet with local leaders, county boards, legislators, tribal councils, foster parents, kinship caregivers, community organizations, providers, and yes, parents and children to incorporate their ideas into a strategic direction for DCF.

These conversations gave us a blueprint on how to help all families best meet the needs of their children and in assuring that every child in our state is ready for success.

The first seven months have produced many successes and many challenges. But at the DCF, we are committed to building on our mission, and dedicated to improving the services we and our partners provide for the children and families of our great state.

We all know about the downturn in the national economy and the devastating effects it has had on many people in Wisconsin. Yet, as Governor Doyle has said many times, the single most important thing we can do to ensure a strong, successful future for Wisconsin is to invest in our children and families.

While we are in difficult economic times, the Department of Children and Families will continue our commitment to protecting children, strengthening families and building strong communities, one child at a time.

- Now, more than ever, we must ensure that kids are safe and nurtured.
- We must help families identify and overcome the struggles that can lead to abuse or neglect before maltreatment occurs. When maltreatment does happen, we must act swiftly to provide effective, reliable services all across Wisconsin.
- We must make sure all families have access to affordable, high-quality child care and ensure that parents can secure meaningful jobs to support their children.
- We must work with fathers to help more of them become actively involved in the lives of their kids.

With a clear charge from Governor Doyle, we set out to create not just a new state department, but a new kind of government agency. We are refocusing, retooling and reprioritizing programs to best fit the needs of Wisconsin's children and families... families of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Our Department streamlines more than 30 programs previously spread out over two state agencies. And since we opened our doors on July 1, we have accomplished many things to better serve children.

- I am pleased to say that the Department opened on July 1, 2008, on time and with no new state positions or additional state funding. Our agency was established as a cost neutral proposition and we delivered on that. With a new vision, new leadership, and an improved organizational structure, we are positioned perfectly to yield positive returns for the children of our state.
- On the very first day, we launched a Child Care Search web site to assist parents in locating quality child care for their children. This site provides parents with valuable information about licensed child care options, including the names, address, capacity, as well as compliance history of centers in their area. This is an excellent first step toward providing more information on quality. The response we've received shows this information is in high demand. In December alone, we had more than 90,000 hits to the web site.
- In less than six months, we filled 25 initial assessment social worker positions which were vacant at the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare when we opened for business. This was the first time in years that all Initial assessment social worker positions were filled at the same time.

- We connected W-2 participant families and foster families who have middle and high school age children to the Wisconsin Covenant and Youth Apprenticeship programs.
- Through better allocation of existing resources, we were able to establish five new child care licensing positions in southeast Wisconsin and create six new initial assessment social worker positions in the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare.
- With the help of Governor Doyle, we created the state's first Early Childhood Advisory Council. This new Council, which I am honored to co-chair with State Superintendent Libby Burmaster, will work to achieve improved coordination of resources for our youngest children.

These are just a few of the highlights of the past eight and a half months at the Department of Children and Families.

While these ideas and initiatives say a lot about how we are refocusing, retooling and reprioritizing our programs to fit the needs of Wisconsin's families, they only tell part of the story about our young state agency.

To ensure that all children in foster and out-of-home care in Milwaukee are safe and in caring homes, we've implemented sweeping changes throughout the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare.

- We're working with pediatric specialists at the Children's Hospital of Milwaukee to conduct medical evaluations of all children age 5 and younger who have been placed in foster or kinship care in the last 10 months.
- In the first cohort, we checked on the most vulnerable children, ages 3 and under. We then extended these medical visits to children ages 4 and 5. These medical evaluations began on December 18<sup>th</sup> and included more than 500 kids.

While the medical reviews are essential in evaluating the safety and health of a child, they are only part of the comprehensive review process we have put in place. We are currently conducting comprehensive in-home reviews for more than 500 children placed in Kinship and foster care in Milwaukee County.

Through our comprehensive medical reviews, more than 500 individual children have received a thorough and complete medical evaluation from a Pediatrician. More than 500 individual home visits conducted by more than 20 child welfare professionals from across Wisconsin will be completed. The scope and scale of this comprehensive review process is unprecedented in Milwaukee and the State of Wisconsin.

In the upcoming weeks we will finalize the procurement and announce the Bureau's new partner in Region 3 of Milwaukee. Simultaneously, we have started a nationwide recruitment for a new BMCW Director. We are aggressively searching for a seasoned, effective child welfare professional with management experience in a large and diverse urban environment.

Our efforts to refocus, reprioritize and retool programs have extended into child care.

The Wisconsin Shares program provides financial child care assistance to low-income parents across the state that are working or preparing to enter the workforce. For nearly 34,000 Wisconsin families, Shares offers a gateway to employment and an improved quality of life.

Since July 1<sup>st</sup>, we have worked diligently to stop the individuals that fraud the Shares system, cheating Wisconsin taxpayers and giving hard working parents and providers a bad name. The State revoked 15 child care licenses in 2008.

At DCF, we've brought together child care regulation and licensing responsibilities from the Department of Health and Family Services with the Shares program, formerly housed in the Department of Workforce Development. By combining child care licensing and child care subsidy into one Division at DCF, we have improved cooperation and communication between licensers and counties, allowing us to more closely monitor attendance data and suggested improper payments or fraud. In the fall of last year, we added five child care licensing positions in Southeast Wisconsin.

In November, we implemented new policies governing the oversight of the Wisconsin Shares program. The changes directed new requirements for county agencies to verify parents' employment when authorizing Shares hours.

In February, DCF staff began placing liens on fraudulent parents' property, further expanding our capability to recoup overpayments.

Last month, the legislature authorized and the Governor signed into law a recommendation from DCF to create a swipe-card system for licensed child care providers who receive Shares so we can more accurately record and monitor utilization of child care and link it to reimbursement for services rendered. We have already issued a Request for Information and will be working closely with child care providers, parents and system vendors to get a swipe-card system working in Wisconsin.

The Governor also requested the creation of a Child Care Program Integrity Unit which will improve oversight and management of the Wisconsin Shares program. This group will monitor data to target high-risk providers and will work with local authorities to investigate and go after providers and parents who are scamming the system.

In his budget proposal, Governor Doyle presented multiple initiatives that will work to improve child care quality and stop provider fraud.

- The Governor's budget specifically called for \$2.8 million to develop and implement a child care Quality Rating and Improvement System to give families the tools they need to evaluate the quality of child care providers.
- By increasing a focus on the practices of high-quality centers and by encouraging low-quality centers to improve their policies, capacity and performance, a quality rating system will raise the overall level of care children receive across the state.

The Governor and I are dedicated to providing affordable high-quality child care for hardworking, low-income Wisconsin families. Representative Grigsby and Senator Jauch share this commitment, and I am pleased to be working with them on legislation that will allow us to exercise greater oversight of the Wisconsin Shares program. By regulating the hours of Shares care, limiting family Shares arrangements where relatives care for each others kids, and by changing the definition of a provider, we will close loopholes and create new options to hold accountable those that fraud this essential program for many hardworking Wisconsin families.

Once implemented, these new initiatives and legislation will increase program integrity and ensure that taxpayer dollars are going to the hardworking, low-income parents that rely on the Shares program to maintain their employment and receive quality child care for their kids.

We are taking new action to help parents achieve economic stability for their families.

The W-2 program, or Wisconsin Works, was created in the mid-1990's. At that time we had nearly 90,000 AFDC participants in the program. Today, roughly 6,700 Wisconsin citizens receive cash assistance through W-2.

Of those currently receiving cash assistance, we know most experience multiple barriers to sustained employment. Most are single parents, with less than a high school education. Many struggle with mental illness and/or chemical dependence. Some have criminal records, often for crimes related to poverty (theft, fraud, writing bad checks, driving without a license).

Most W-2 participants cycle on and off of the program. At the Department of Children and Families, we believe a job is the pathway to economic stability. But for many low income workers, a job is just the beginning.

Access to health care, education and training and transportation all play a vital role in helping families advance financially and socially.

The current economic downturn has created a unique challenge for many W-2 participants. With increasing unemployment, more and more people with greater educational skills and learning have entered the job market. Additionally, some employers are simply not accepting job applications—making it more difficult, and in some cases impossible, for W-2 participants to complete job search requirements.

Today, roughly 6,700 families in W-2 receiving cash benefits. This is virtually equal to the number of families served one year ago when unemployment was low and the economy strong. Although data analysis has not indicated a one-to-one correlation between an economic downturn and an increase in W-2 participants, W-2 has never encountered an economic decline like the one we are currently experiencing. Moreover, the federal TANF was never created with the depth and length of unemployment, and plunging economy many economists are forecasting for our nation.

Thus, at this juncture, it is difficult to predict what effect this economic crisis will have on the W-2 program, and more importantly, the children and families the program was designed to serve.

To help families at a time when the state has limited resources, we need to streamline W-2 bureaucracy, get rid of unnecessary regulatory hurdles parents encounter, ease access to the program, and bring this dated program in line with contemporary family needs. The complexity of W-2 and the resulting administrative burdens have become barriers to effectively helping Wisconsin families. Not only is it difficult to serve existing W-2 families, but it leaves less time and resources for serving additional Wisconsin families that may not be accessing W-2 services but would ultimately benefit from them.

We are also working on new legislative priorities for your consideration to better support families...all families of Wisconsin.

I look forward to working with all of you as we strive to codify the Indian Child Welfare Act into Wisconsin's Children's Code. This federal law was passed more than 30 years ago, yet Wisconsin continues to struggle to meet the requirements of this act. The impact to Wisconsin's tribal nations is profound. Now is the time to codify the Indian Child Welfare Act into Wisconsin law. Again, I would like to recognize and thank Senator Jauch on his tremendous leadership as work to draft this legislation.

We must also work together to pass the federal compliance legislation. Without its passage, we risk losing additional federal funding for programs needed to support child protective services and prevention services.

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By creating the Department of Children and Families, the Governor and legislature have given us an historic opportunity to place a new emphasis on our most important assets—our children.

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March 17, 2009

As Secretary of the Department of Children and Families, I have had the great privilege of traveling the state, talking with parents of young children, meeting with professionals in child-centered fields, and engaging with youngsters. I am also a parent of three children, Mackenzie (11), Christine (9) and Nathaniel (20 months).

The more conversations I have with parents across the state, the more I learn as Secretary and the more I grow as a father, the more I realize what an incredible opportunity we have to reprioritize our approach to building Wisconsin's future.

For me, today marks a new step of what has already been an incredible personal and professional journey to improve the lives of children. With more than 15 years of social work experience as a child welfare social worker and supervisor, including serving as Director of Human Services in Pierce County, I have enjoyed helping families find solutions to their seemingly overwhelming challenges. My wife, Becky, who is an elementary school principal, and I knew we could do more for children than careers offered, so we opened our hearts and home to become foster parents.

Education is the key to a successful future for all of Wisconsin's children. I feel passionately about this, and promoted this passion while serving on the Board of Education for the School District of La Crosse.

These wonderful experiences and others have prepared me well for the opportunity to serve as the inaugural Secretary for the Department of Children and Families.

The challenges facing our Department are tough, but the Governor didn't appoint me to talk about problems. I'm here to take action, to take advantage of new opportunities and to create new solutions for the children and families of Wisconsin.

That's what I've done over the past eight and a half months, and with your support, that's what I will continue to do.

It is clear that numerous challenges lie ahead of us. But I look forward to working with you as we solve those challenges and continue to protect children, strengthen families and build communities...one child at a time.

Thank you.