



WISCONSIN LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

STRENGTHENING WISCONSIN FAMILIES

Legislative Council Conference Room
Madison, Wisconsin

February 7, 2007
10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

[The following is a summary of the February 7, 2007 meeting of the Special Committee on Strengthening Wisconsin Families. The file copy of this summary has appended to it a copy of each document prepared for or submitted to the committee during the meeting. A digital recording of the meeting is available on our Web site at <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/lc>.]

Call to Order and Roll Call

Chair Kestell called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m. The roll was called and a quorum was present.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: Rep. Steve Kestell, Chair; Rep. Don Pridemore; Sens. Lena Taylor and Dale Schultz; and Public Members Jon Angeli, Lisa Boyd-Gonzalez, John Burgess, Carol Kelso, Kenneth Munson, Jodi Roberts, Paula Roberts, Jack Westman, and Carol Wright.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS EXCUSED: Rep. Donna Seidel; and Public Member Charity Eleson, and Paul Minkus.

COUNCIL STAFF PRESENT: Laura Rose, Deputy Director; and Scott Grosz, Staff Attorney.

Approval of the Minutes of the January 9, 2007 Meeting

Mr. Angeli, moved, seconded by Dr. Westman, to approve the minutes of the January 9, 2007 meeting of the Special Committee. The motion was approved by a voice vote.

Presentations by Invited Speakers

- **JoAnna Richard, Department of Workforce Development (DWD) and Dianne Jenkins and Katie Plona, Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS)**

JoAnna Richard, Deputy Secretary, DWD, Dianne Jenkins, DHFS Liaison to the Special Committee, and Katie Plona, Legislative Liaison, DHFS, presented information on Governor Doyle's proposal to create a new Department of Children and Families. Several committee members expressed support for the proposal. Ms. Carol Wright expressed some concern about the exclusion of juvenile corrections programs from the new department. Ms. Carol Kelso commented that alcohol and other drug abuse services should be included in the new department, because the availability of these services has a huge impact on families.

Chair Kestell commented that the Legislature will want to have some involvement in designing the structure of the new department. Ms. Paula Roberts expressed some concern that the FoodShare program would not be relocated into the new department, and expressed concern that the FoodShare program might be lost in the newly named Department of Health Services.

- **Dianne Jenkins, DHFS Liaison to the Special Committee**

Ms. Jenkins outlined several program areas in DHFS in which there is an emphasis on engaging fathers in the lives of children. Some of these programs include: information on adding father's name to birth certificates; the Healthy Birth Outcomes Initiative; the Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative; the home visitation project in the City of Milwaukee; the Brighter Futures Initiative; policies and processes developed within the child welfare system to involve fathers; the paternal interest registry program; and the strengthening families program.

- **Mark Perlman, Center for Growth and Development, Sarasota, Florida**

Mr. Perlman described the "Nurturing Fathers" program which he created. It was started in 1998 and is now present, in some form, in 46 states. Mr. Perlman noted research conducted on the Nurturing Fathers program and said that the fathers involved in the program show significant increase in understanding of developmental capabilities of children, improved ability to demonstrate empathy to the needs of children, improved use of alternate strategies to corporal punishment, increased understanding and acceptance of the needs of the self and children, and increased value placed on children feeling empowered. The results also suggested an overall improvement in parental attitudes and behaviors that have been known to contribute to child abuse and neglect.

Mr. Perlman also described the implementation of these programs in correctional systems as a strong tool to reduce recidivism among ex-offenders.

- **Clifford Solomon, Graduate, Nurturing Fathers Program**

Mr. Solomon described his years of incarceration, which resulted in him missing the first 10 years of his daughter's life. He described his experience in the Nurturing Fathers program which taught him the importance of the qualities of patience, open mindedness, and nurturing in being a good father. He suggested that the Nurturing Fathers program should be placed in the school system. In response to

questions, Mr. Solomon described his adjustment of his daughter to his new involvement in her life. He stated that she still feels somewhat insecure because she does not want him to leave. Mr. Solomon praised Nurturing Fathers as different from many other Department of Corrections programs because it is an in-depth program that examines the person's motivations and feelings.

- **Glenn Olsen, High Risk Population Specialist, and Jane Penner-Hoppe, KidsFirst Policy Advisor, DWD**

Glenn Olsen and Jane Penner-Hoppe described the incorporation of fatherhood initiatives into various DWD programs. Mr. Olsen described a "tool kit" that has been developed to help agencies work with fathers. The tool kit was developed by Rosalie Manor, Milwaukee. Mr. Olsen also described the Children First programs in 39 counties, for noncustodial parents who have trouble paying court-ordered child support. He also described the Fatherhood Summit in Milwaukee in which 536 child support cases were reviewed. 254 of these cases were found eligible for forgiveness of accrued interest on overdue child support payments. He also described the workforce advancement and attachment project in Milwaukee, which grew out of the fatherhood initiative. Ms. Penner-Hoppe described the Milwaukee Family Services Integration Office. She also described the Brighter Futures Program and the Wisconsin Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Committee, both of which will be sited in the proposed Department of Children and Families. Mr. Angeli commented that fatherhood initiatives should be built into the Children First program. Mr. Olsen cited a statistic that 90% of women getting off of welfare are getting full child support benefits. JoAnna Richard added that Wisconsin collects \$5.60 for each dollar spent on the child support collection program, which is one of the best rates in the nation.

- **Hughes George, Director of Parent and Student Services, Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS)**

Mr. George discussed truancy issues in MPS, noting that if a child is truant five or more days during a semester, this is an indicator of other problems within the home. In these situations, MPS staff make contact with the family. These families usually exhibit basic needs for items such as food, child care services, and other items. Many of these children are also involved in the juvenile justice system. In response to a question from Representative Pridemore, Mr. George stated that the truancy rate in MPS is very high, with 40,000 out of 96,000 students considered truant. He also noted that between 10,000 and 12,000 students are absent on any given day in the MPS. He said in some cases, social workers go into the homes and bring kids to school. Some other factors contributing to truancy are older children taking care of younger siblings because parents are at work, and a large number of parents neglecting to call the school if the child is sick. In response to a question from Chair Kestell on what that state could do differently, Mr. George suggested looking at the definition of habitual truant, which he felt is too restrictive. Mr. George noted a bill from last session introduced by Representative Krusick that would have required the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare to be involved earlier in truancy cases.

Mr. Munson suggested a different system than the child welfare system, to get truant children back in school. He suggested a voluntary system "with some teeth" be developed. There was also some committee discussion of neighborhood schools as a way to enhance community efforts to combat truancy. Ms. Paula Roberts noted that there is an increasing number of children who are homeless and in transitional living arrangements, and wondered how much this might be contributing to high truancy rates.

Mr. George then discussed the expulsion issue, and described the difference between being expelled with services, when MPS is still responsible for the education of the child, and expulsion without services, when children are expelled for breaking disciplinary rules.

- **Tony Streveler, Policy Initiatives Advisor, Department of Corrections**

Mr. Streveler said that the biggest risk factors for recidivism among released prisoners are safe and secure housing; employment; availability of treatment; and having a positive family support network and other positive associations. He said that the department estimates that 55% of incarcerated persons in the system have a dependent child under the age of 18. He noted that 1 in 3 children in the United States have currently have, or have had in the past, a parent in the correctional system. Children with an incarcerated parent are much more likely to experience depression, suicidology, alcohol and other drug abuse issues, school problems, and are 4 to 5 times more likely to be engaged in the criminal justice system than a child without a parent in the correctional system. He said that the new focus is to break this cycle to expose prisoners to proper parenting skills, connecting the child with the parent during confinement, and providing services to the caregiver during the other parent's confinement. He said that some of the issues that come up with connecting a child with an incarcerated parent include transportation, with an average 100 miles of distance between the child and the incarcerated parent, limited visitation times; security issues; an intimidating environment in the prison; scheduling issues; limited telephone access; and limited writing skills of incarcerated parents.

Mr. Streveler commented on programs that provide transportation for visitation at prisons, and also talked about informational fairs held at prisons to showcase a variety of community resources to released prisoners. Mr. Streveler stated that most children with incarcerated parents are not in foster care but that most are in kinship care of some form. He stated that the idea of coordinating services with other entities is a new concept in the correctional system. He said it is important to make the system simple enough so that the average person is able to navigate between and among the systems. He also stated that it is important to have a champion for the system integration concept in each local area.

- **Judge James Gramling, Jr., City of Milwaukee Municipal Court**

Judge Gramling discussed drivers' license issues with the committee. He distributed an article from the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel describing the impact of a lack of drivers' licenses on employment. He said there are several factors that contribute to this problem, including the lack of affordable drivers' education; a suspension of driving privileges increasingly being used as a sanction for nondriving related offenses; poverty, which keeps people from being able to pay traffic fines and can result in a suspension or revocation of the license; and the mobility of society, where a driver's license is a key to employment.

Senator Taylor noted that low-income people of color in Milwaukee tended to get stopped by police for minor violations which often result in their licenses being suspended or revoked because of accrued unpaid fines. Chair Kestell asked Judge Gramling how much discretion judges are entitled to exercise over juvenile offenders. The judge stated that there is very little discretion when a juvenile offender is being sentenced. License suspension is often the only option. At times, community services may be ordered but this is not always enforceable.

Judge Gramling described a new program at Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) which was developed with the cooperation of DWD, the Department of Public Instruction, the State Public Defender, the Department of Revenue, and the Department of Transportation. The City of Milwaukee and four private foundations are providing funding. They are trying to tie the availability of driver's education classes to school attendance. He also encouraged workforce funding to be focused on this program, because a driver's license is often the key to employability.

Judge Gramling discussed legal changes that could be made to improve the rate of driver licensing. First of all, he stated that judges have discretion over suspending licenses for drug offenses. He said that this is very punitive, and noted that 37 states have opted out of this method of punishment. He noted that the State Safety Responsibility Form 22, which requires a person to have insurance for three years, is quite a burden for a low-income driver. Judge Gramling also stated that ch. 800, Stats., which governs municipal courts, clearly allows judges to order community services for unpaid traffic fines. However, he said that some judges think the statute should be written more clearly. Senator Taylor commented that community service is generally not used as a sanction, but that it should be. Ms. Boyd-Gonzalez commented that W-2 agencies have experienced contract funding cuts and that there is no longer enough funding to help clients get their licenses back. She stated that W-2 job access loans might be able to be used for this purpose, but the money is not there.

Other Business

There was no other business before the Special Committee at this time.

Plans for Future Meetings

The next meeting will be held on *Monday, March 12, 2007, at 10:00 a.m., in the Large Conference Room, Legislative Council, 1 East Main Street, Suite 401, Madison, Wisconsin.*

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 4:00 p.m.

LR:tlu