

**A WISCONSIN
DEPARTMENT
OF FAMILY RESOURCES**



A Proposal by
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Wisconsin Cares, Inc., strongly supports Governor Doyle's proposal to create a new state Department of Children and Family Services. This is an important opportunity for Wisconsin to lead the nation in aligning state prevention and intervention programs with local needs through our strong county system.

An Opportunity for Innovation

The new department can consolidate existing policies and practices. It also can be an opportunity to develop and implement an innovative family-strengthening vision, such as articulated in *Vision 2020: Moving all Wisconsin Families Forward*.¹ It can be an opportunity to align state policies with the needs of families in their neighborhoods and communities. It can be an opportunity to stress prevention.

The Status of Wisconsin Programs for Children and Families

Although we are ahead of many states, Wisconsin still is failing our youngest citizens and their families. Our state does not meet national standards for child welfare nor for child care. Federal, state, and local funding is not adequate for existing programs.

A fundamental reason for the shortcomings of these programs is that they have followed a politically popular, but professionally unsound, policy of focusing on *children* rather than on the *families* in which they live. Child welfare has focused on protecting children from their families rather than on strengthening their families. Child care has focused on caring for children rather than involving their families. W-2 has focused on the employment of parents rather than on the well-being of families.

To Wisconsin's credit, a family emphasis is emerging in our state departments and legislature in response to national critiques and to the needs of families in the communities in which they live. A Legislative Council Special Committee on Strengthening Families was established in 2006 by 05 Act 467.

Child Welfare

In 2003, Wisconsin's child welfare program was evaluated by the federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF) through a Child and Family Services Review (CFSR). Our state was found to be in substantial non-conformance with several outcomes and systemic factors and many individual performance items of the CFSR. In 2004, Wisconsin was given notice to produce a statewide improvement plan that must produce measurable progress within two years.

Wisconsin's Child Welfare Program Enhancement Plan (PEP) *A Response to the Federal Child and Family Service Review* was approved in November, 2004, as one part of a renewed Wisconsin commitment to create opportunities for all children to grow up safe, healthy, and successful. The first overarching strategy of PEP is to *help families strengthen their capacities to provide a safe and nurturing environment for their children*.

In Wisconsin communities, cross-system agency collaboration and the delivery of services and resources through integrated teams aim to increase *family-centered practices* in the child welfare, welfare-to-work, health, and mental health areas.

Child Care

In March, 2007, the National Association of Child Care Resources and Referral Agencies released an evaluation of state child care standards. Wisconsin ranked 8th in

standards and 47th in oversight of those standards. Without sufficient oversight, there is no way to evaluate whether or not our state standards are being met.

Strengthening Families-Wisconsin was produced by a nineteen organization Leadership Team led by the Children's Trust Fund. It stresses the effective delivery of parent education and family support in early child care and education.² Evidence based research clearly points to the need for family involvement in early childhood programs.³

Welfare-to-Work (W-2)

The need to improve coordination between child welfare and W-2 programs led to the proposal that these functions in the Departments of Health and Family Services and the Department of Workforce Development be consolidated in a new Department of Children and Family Services.

Families Forward and Family Foundations

The *Families Forward* and *Family Foundations* initiatives have emerged through state interdepartmental collaboration with localities. *Families Forward* focuses on developing local models of service integration. *Family Foundations* focuses on universal home visitation for first time parents who are eligible for medical assistance.

What's in a Name?

Although names of departments are much less important than their functions, names do convey images of missions. We suggest that the name of the new department be the *Department of Family Resources* for seven reasons:

1) Families are under siege.

The integrity of the family is threatened.⁴ Half of our nation's children will spend all or part of their childhoods in one-parent homes or homeless – often living in and out of poverty. Families need recognition and support now more than ever before.

2) The "Child Saver" movement has failed

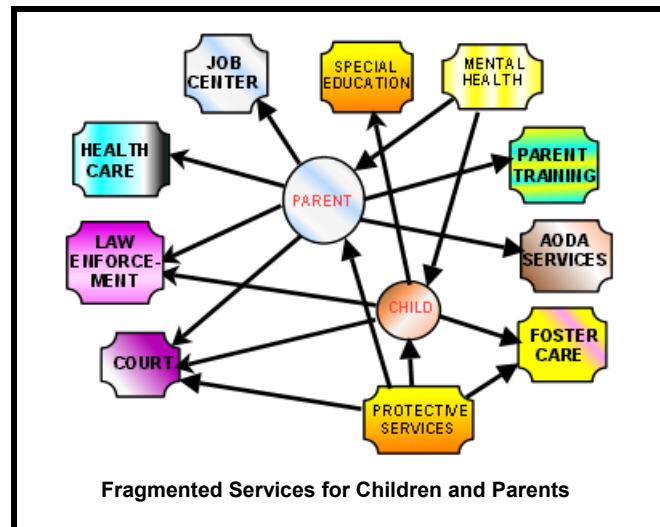
Although originating from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1875, the prevention emphasis was quickly lost as services developed to protect children from child abuse and neglect. Until recent decades as a family treatment emphasis has grown, child protective services have removed children from their homes and created an extensive system of foster and institutional care.

In fact, “protective services for children” that focus on removing neglected and abused children from their homes rather than strengthening their families while they remain at home *have created free-standing children*. In Wisconsin, over 8,000 children wait in foster care for their parents to meet return conditions, too often without adequate treatment for both children and their parents. Even worse, the timely termination of parental rights often is delayed leaving children in long-term foster care that too often leads to changing foster homes.

Scientific evidence and best practice standards clearly show that child neglect and abuse should be seen as symptoms of struggling families that need help rather than punitive action. The emphasis should shift from *protecting children* to *strengthening families*.

3) Children and parents should not be seen as free-standing persons.

The word “children” in governmental programs has political appeal, but it also conveys the idea that children are *free-standing* persons. The phrase “children and families” clearly implies that “children” and “families” (parents) are separate entities. Historically, this separation has led to a greater emphasis on children than on the families in which they live. It has led to the fragmentation and discontinuity of services for children and their parents.



Moreover, the most effective childcare is not simply caring for children. It involves families as well.

The primary mission of a new department should emphasize "strengthening families" rather than "protecting children." This means strengthening struggling families or creating a new family through adoption when return to a family is not in a child's interests. The political appeal of “children” should be secondary to strengthening "families." This line of thinking argues for a *Department of Family*....

4) Using resources rather than receiving services.

The word “services” conveys the image of work performed for others. The word "resources" in *Department of Family Resources* would convey the image of persons drawing upon others to assist them in their own efforts.

Financial assistance, education, training, childcare, counseling, and job placement really are "resources" for family members not "services." When government is seen as providing "services," the emphasis is on what professionals do for clients rather than on what family members do for themselves. Providing "services" creates a climate in which professionals are expected to change the behavior of family members. If change does not occur, the "services" are deemed to be ineffective. A more realistic emphasis would be on promoting and providing "resources" for families. Then the responsibility for using "resources" effectively would lie with family members themselves.

A *Department of Family Resources* also would mitigate the stigma of receiving "public welfare services." People would be active users of "resources" rather than passive

recipients of "services." They would have a greater voice in, and ownership of, the "resources" they need.

This emphasis on personal responsibility and using resources to strengthen families would follow the visions of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 and of W-2.

5) Greater emphasis on prevention.

A "family" focus has a more preventive perspective than a "child" focus that evokes an image of intervening in a child's life after problems already are manifest. Although it involves both prevention and intervention strategies, a family strengthening strategy focuses attention on the need for neighborhoods and communities that support family life.

6) Aligning state government with local realities

Wisconsin has a strong system of county government that is moving ahead in coordinating family resource networks. Federal and state policies that direct funding streams for categorical programs interfere with this trend. They need to be aligned with the realities of family life in their communities.

Each community has an informal network of resources for families. Inter-agency collaboration and integrating resources around families through Coordinated Services Teams and Wraparound Teams are contributing to strengthening families, especially those that are struggling. This local trend needs support at the state level.



7) Families are state resources.

Finally, families are the foundation of our society and civilization. Families produce productive citizens upon which the prosperity of our state depends. Like the Department of Natural Resources, a *Department of Family Resources* would convey the image of families as resources for the state.

Wisconsin is known as a state with abundant resources for family life. One of the most compelling reasons people come to Wisconsin is our reputation as a good place to raise a family.⁵ We should make this image a reality for all of our families.

Will Wisconsin Follow or Lead Other States?

Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, and Vermont have Departments of Children and Families. Delaware, New Mexico, and Rhode Island have Departments of Children, Youth, and Families. Texas has a Department of Families and Protective Services. Wyoming has a Department of Family Services. Washington has a Family Policy Council.

Wisconsin could lead the nation by taking all of these considerations into account and creating a *Department of Family Resources*. The name of the department would reflect a mission to strengthen Wisconsin families.

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