



WISCONSIN LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

STRENGTHENING WISCONSIN FAMILIES

Room 411 South, State Capitol
Madison, Wisconsin

August 25, 2008
11:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

[The following is a summary of the August 25, 2008 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

Co-Chair Kestell called the meeting to order. The roll was called and it was determined that a quorum was present.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: Rep. Steve Kestell, Co-Chair; Sen. Lena Taylor, Co-Chair; Sen. Dale Schultz; Reps. Sheryl Albers and Tamara Grigsby; and Public Members Jon Angeli, Debra Fields, Undraye Howard, Terence Ray, Mary Jo Tittl, and Jack Westman.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS EXCUSED: Public Members John Burgess, Gary Erdmann, and Lucille Rosenberg.

COUNCIL STAFF PRESENT: Anne Sappenfield, Senior Staff Attorney; and Jessica Karls, Staff Attorney.

APPEARANCES: Secretary Reggie Bicha, Department of Children and Families (DCF); Lisa Patrick, Administrator, Division of Prevention and Service Integration, DCF; Dan Harris, Administrator, Division of Early Care and Education, DCF; Ron Hunt, Administrator, Division of Enterprise Solutions, DCF; Julie Kerksick, Administrator, Division of Family and Economic Security, DCF; and Cyrus Behroozi, Administrator, Division of Safety and Permanence, DCF.

Approval of the Minutes of the Committee's August 12, 2008 Meeting

Co-Chair Taylor moved, seconded by Mr. Westman, that the minutes of the August 12, 2008 meeting be approved. The motion passed by unanimous consent.

Presentations by Invited Speakers

Mr. Bicha said that this is an exciting time in Wisconsin because the DCF is a cabinet-level agency that will serve as a voice for children and families. He said that he is looking forward to working with the committee.

He stated that he believes DCF must share its agenda and challenges with others, including the Legislature, other state agencies, communities, providers, and consumers. He said that he and others in DCF reached out to many in transitioning into the new department.

He stated that he wants families to have access to the best supports available and cited several recent laws and programs, such as BadgerCare Plus, that support children and families. He said that he is making sure that DCF is focused on accountability and results.

He said that DCF has five overarching goals: (a) children are nurtured and safe from abuse and neglect; (b) prevention and early intervention efforts throughout Wisconsin are enhanced; (c) early care and education programs are of the highest quality and available to families that need them; (d) parents have access to meaningful jobs; and (e) children have healthy and meaningful relationships with their fathers.

Mr. Bicha described portions of DCF's 100-day agenda and described items on the agenda that have already been completed, such as a website on which parents can search for licensed child care providers by zip code.

For more long-term goals, Mr. Bicha said that he hopes to establish a fatherhood office in the Milwaukee area and is evaluating current programs and services to determine how to better integrate resources for children and families.

Mr. Bicha introduced each of the DCF division administrators and Nancy Wettersten, Chief Legal Counsel.

Representative Grigsby asked what the role of the Milwaukee Family Services Integration Office is and how it fits into DCF's plans to further integrate services at the state level. Ms. Patrick responded that the office will stay intact, but that it will hopefully expand to integrate services in Milwaukee but also in a wider area of southeast Wisconsin. She said that DCF will be taking a more comprehensive look at all of its divisions to determine how consumers access services and how services can be more integrated.

Representative Albers asked how DCF is addressing the needs of individuals with disabilities once they have completed high school. Mr. Behroozi responded that his division is working on doing a better job for young adults and their families and looking to innovations in that area.

Mr. Ray asked whether there has been any discussion regarding reducing the interest rates on child support arrearages. Ms. Wettersten said that the interest rate is statutory, but that accumulated interest can be waived on a case-by-case basis by DCF. She said that she would like to look at a method for waiving interest that does not require case-by-case analysis of whether interest should be waived.

Ms. Tittl stated that she sees segregation between early “care” for children and early “education.” Mr. Harris said that he believes DCF has an opportunity to help caregivers see the importance of their role in a child’s life. He said that all early child care is education and that providers need to be aware of that. Ms. Tittl also mentioned that child care and early education funding is very specifically targeted and that there are, therefore, funding “silos.” Mr. Harris said that some local agencies have figured out how to integrate funding and that he would like to bring this best practices information to other providers. Mr. Bicha added that the federal government also needs to understand the challenges created by how federal funding is structured.

Ms. Fields noted that, in cases of teen pregnancy, the father is also often a teen. Ms. Kerksick said that a different approach often needs to be taken for teen families. She said that, when possible, teens need to stay in school. She said that parenthood can be a motivation for some young men to finish school and transition into the labor market.

Mr. Westman said that DCF needs to avoid the pressure to focus on child care and early education instead of the role of parents. He also said that DCF has a challenge of needing to work with other state agencies that have an impact children and families. Mr. Bicha said that he has been trying to figure out how to work with other state agencies. He also noted that Governor Doyle has asked members of his cabinet to establish a children’s cabinet whose membership would include the secretaries of the Departments of Workforce Development, Corrections, and Health Services.

Mr. Howard asked whether DCF has plans to address high turnover among social workers. Mr. Behroozi said that DCF has added a human resources position in Milwaukee to improve social worker recruitment. He said that there will always be some turnover, so DCF is also considering how to better transition families to a new worker.

Mr. Howard also asked about the relationship between child care licensing authorities and providers. Mr. Harris said that a licensing authority should not be looking for non-compliance but should have the goal of helping providers provide better care for children. He said that he is working to achieve better consistency across the state in oversight of providers.

Finally, Mr. Howard asked what DCF’s plan is if the current approaches do not work. Mr. Bicha said that the changes DCF is trying to make will be part of a process. He said DCF will use data to determine what is working and, if something is not working, why it is not working.

Co-Chair Kestell said that he believes that establishing DCF in the Budget Act without universal buy-in for the concept was not a good start for the new department. He said that he wants the cooperation of other state agencies and the integration of family services to be codified in the statutes so that DCF’s goals can remain even if there are changes in the executive and legislative branches. He

advised Mr. Bicha to stay engaged with the committee and the Legislature in order to achieve changes to state law that will ensure that the goals of DCF are lasting.

Ms. Tittl asked how DCF will encourage and support providers in gathering data to evaluate the effectiveness of programs. Mr. Bicha said that he does not want data collection for outcome measures to be cumbersome. He said he plans to create a performance and quality assurance office so that there is a common area in DCF to look at outcomes for all of DCF's programs. He said the budget, policy initiatives, and research staff will also be attached to that office so that funding, policy development, and research can be considered together.

Representative Grigsby said that there is a crisis in Milwaukee due to the backlog of applications for child care subsidies and that parents are losing jobs as a result. Ms. Kerksick said that that is one of her top priorities, but that there is no immediate solution.

Representative Grigsby asked how the relationship between Wisconsin Works (W-2) and child care subsidies will look and how the W-2 program might change. Ms. Kerksick said that she sees child care subsidies as integral to W-2 and that she is working with staff to see that, as well. Mr. Bicha said that the department is evaluating the W-2 program and that, at this point, he does not know what changes will be made.

Representative Albers asked whether DCF could compile data to assist the Legislature in addressing issues relating to mental illness. She also said that there should be work on enforcing child visitation orders and that this is especially an issue for fathers.

Co-Chair Taylor said that DCF needs a mechanism to receive feedback from providers and consumers. She also said that DCF should engage Wisconsin universities and colleges to take advantage of any relevant research that has been conducted. She discussed a concern that large organizations have an advantage over smaller service providers in being awarded DCF contracts and asked Mr. Bicha to look at this issue. She also discussed the importance of connecting foster children with family members and other people in their lives who can offer them support. Finally, she said that DCF needs to figure out how to better involve the community and organizations in the community because government agencies cannot provide every resource to families, but individual organizations do not know how to become involved in providing comprehensive resources.

Mr. Angeli said that he hopes that DCF will use the concept of family systems in determining more effective ways to support families. He also said that he believes young social workers are too quick to remove children from the home because they are told to keep the children safe and that is the only sure way to keep them safe. Mr. Bicha said that DCF is looking at ways to keep more children in the home, when possible, including using team decision-making in child welfare cases.

In response to a series of questions from Senator Schultz, Mr. Bicha said that DCF is a different type of agency as evidenced by his outreach to providers and consumers, the fact that the entire leadership team is included in presentations as a group, and that the department will be able to focus on how programs affect children and families. He said that he hopes to eliminate much bureaucracy. He said he is looking at long-term programs that DCF administers to learn what children need to be successful and to ensure that children have a family system that is best prepared to meet their needs.

Discussion of Committee Assignment

Co-Chair Kestell said that committee members had received at their places a list of potential legislative proposals. He asked members to contact Ms. Sappenfield or Ms. Karls as to which one or two options the committee should consider and to add topics, if a topic they wish to have the committee consider is not listed. He said that committee members would receive the document electronically, as well.

Senator Schultz said that he would like the committee to hear from a panel that includes representatives from the Department of Public Instruction and school districts to discuss what they see as issues the committee may address. Representative Albers said that a similar presentation from representatives of the University of Wisconsin would be helpful.

Other Business

There was no other business brought before the committee.

Plans for Future Meetings

The next meeting of the Special Committee will be on *Friday, September 26, 2008, at 10:00 a.m., in Room 411 South, State Capitol, Madison.*

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 3:00 p.m.

AS:jal