



**Human Services Department**  
**County of La Crosse, Wisconsin**

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TO: Members of the Strengthening Families Legislative Committee

FROM: Jerry Huber, Human Services Director La Crosse County

DATE: March 2, 2009

I would like to thank the members of the Committee on Strengthening Families for the opportunity to discuss with you the concept of creating a statewide Family Policy Board. When I first came to Wisconsin in 1998, I was impressed by the service array which was available to families and children by many different organizations. I did, however, realize that often these services were not integrated or coordinated in a way to achieve both cost efficiencies in operation and agreed upon outcomes for families. Due to this, in La Crosse we established a Family Policy Board around five years ago to provide what I call the “3 Cs” needed for integrated services and improved outcomes for families:

- (1) Communication – each of the 40 to 50 agencies on the Family Policy Board are asked to share communication on issues, concerns, new initiatives, grants being proposed, etc. with the members of the Family Policy Board (FPB).
- (2) Coordination – we attempt to have the Board involved with working on complex issues around the delivery of services to families and children in a way which allows the coordination of various systems. These systems include the schools, courts, law enforcement, child welfare, local service providers, etc. Better outcomes to families can be achieved through coordinated services.
- (3) Collaboration – the Family Policy Board attempts to have a shared philosophy regarding families and children in the county. The primary goal of the FPB is to create a culture of partnership with many different agencies and sectors of the community working toward common goals for families.

Outcomes for children in the child welfare system are usually dependent upon the services available within the community. We do feel that the state made a good decision in creating the new Department of Children and Families last year. However, it is critical that this new department link arms with the Department of Health Services to improve mental health, substance abuse and other services which are so often needed by families in the child welfare system. We feel that the linkages between these department and DPI and DOC are necessary in the creation of common goals and purposes for families and children throughout the state.

I personally am less concerned about the structure of the Family Policy Board as I am about creating a process for which shared values, goals and ideas can come forward within the various departments. Perhaps this can be done with existing structures in place at the state now but I do believe that there has to be a purposeful look at whether or not a consistent philosophy and a

common vision exists within the various departments that intersect with families in Wisconsin. The opportunity to develop a board which seeks the creation of this shared philosophy and commitment to resources to improve the outcomes for families is especially vital now as older models of service may not work in a weakened economy.

I am pleased that the Governor included a number of goals and programs for families and children in his budget although there were also significant cuts to counties. One of the programs that was included is for piloting the Alternative Response program for child protection cases. La Crosse has been involved with a pilot for this program for over five years and have found it an effective way to reach out to families before they become involved in an adversarial relationship with CPS and the courts. We trust that your committee would advocate for this program to be expanded in Wisconsin under the Governor's budget.

In conclusion, I believe counties in Wisconsin would benefit from the development of a coordination board which could direct and steer various state departments to common goals, vision, and resources for families and children in Wisconsin. We all have a similar goal to assure that children are safe and able to reach their full potential. I appreciate the work of your committee and again thank you for the opportunity to share with you my thoughts.

GRH:rew