

# Children's Trust Fund

Wisconsin's Resource for Preventing Child Abuse

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Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board

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## Special Committee on Strengthening Wisconsin Families

**Tuesday, March 3, 2009**

**10:00 AM**

**State Capitol, Room 411 South**

### Testimony

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Children's Trust Fund**

Thank you Representative Kestell, Senator Taylor and members of the Special Committee on Strengthening Wisconsin Families for inviting the Children's Trust Fund to address your committee about our work.

I will start by giving some brief history about the Children's Trust Fund, including several of our key initiatives, and then I will talk briefly about the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board's position on the Family Policy Integration Board proposal.

In 1983, Wisconsin was one of the first states in the nation to create an agency dedicated to the prevention of child maltreatment when the legislature created the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board. The 20-member Board administers the Children's Trust Fund. The Governor appoints ten public members and the other ten members represent the Governor, five state departments, and both major parties of the legislature. I have attached to my testimony the current membership of the Board.

The Board's mission is to advocate, support, and sustain a statewide culture that encourages family and community life in which children will develop and flourish in a safe environment free from all forms of abuse and neglect. Specifically, as designated in statute, the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board has three areas of responsibility:

1. **Policy** – “Recommend to the Governor, the legislature, and state agencies changes needed in state programs, statutes, policies, budgets and rules to reduce the problems of child abuse and neglect, improve coordination among state agencies that provide prevention services, promote individual, family, and community strengths, build parenting skills, and provide community support for children and families.”
2. **Education and Professional Development** – The Children’s Trust Fund uses positive, innovative public education materials to advance prevention messages at the individual, community, and societal levels. With a range of public and private partners, we develop and distribute materials throughout the state, ranging from positive parenting brochures and Shaken Baby Syndrome fact sheets to public education campaigns about child sexual abuse prevention. In addition, the Children’s Trust Fund is a key partner in promoting and advancing professional development in the field of family support and home visiting programs.
3. **Programs** – The Children’s Trust Fund funds a mix of established, proven programs and innovative approaches to prevent child abuse and support and strengthen families. In State Fiscal Year 2009, we disbursed approximately \$3 million in grants. Once grants are awarded we ensure program quality by providing technical assistance, training staff, and evaluating program outcomes.

We have seven full time staff carrying out the mission and responsibilities of the Children’s Trust Fund, including an Executive Director, Associate Director, Professional Development Director, Programs Director and an Office Manager. The remaining two positions are currently vacant and we are awaiting the outcome of our Board’s upcoming strategic planning process to determine the most effective use of the positions.

I’d like to touch on a few of the key strategies and initiatives where our staff is currently focusing their efforts:

***Community Response Pilot Programs*** – Since 2004, the Children’s Trust Fund has nearly doubled the number of grants to a total of 10 counties to

support the Community Response Model program. This promising approach provides comprehensive services to families who have come to the attention of the local child protective service agency, yet have been screened out because there is no immediate safety risk to the child. The families are provided with voluntary services to address the issues that brought them to the attention of the child protective services agency. These programs are a partnership between the Family Resource Centers, Community Action Agencies, the county child protective services agency, United Ways and others in each community.

The Children's Trust Fund has funded the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to evaluate the first year of implementation of the Community Response programs in all 10 counties. In their initial findings, two-thirds of the families referred to Community Response were referred because of income or basic needs, such as rental assistance, food, transportation, etc. In addition, 50% of the families were unemployed and 58% had less than a high school education. As a result of such a high percentage of families needing basic assistance, CTF has provided an additional \$20,000 dollars in flex funding to each Community Response program to meet families' basic needs. CTF will continue to fund evaluation of this promising model, including looking at the effectiveness of preventing families from being re-referred to child protective services. Several of the programs have told us that they have had none or very few referrals back to child protective services on families that were involved in the Community Response program.

CTF recently awarded another Community Response grant to the United Way of Racine County and we are engaged in conversations with the Department of Children and Families regarding the possibility of a Community Response program in Milwaukee County.

***Family Resource Centers*** – CTF provides significant funding to 20 Family Resource Centers statewide to provide universally accessible services to children and families that meet their basic needs and strengthens their capacity for success. In State Fiscal Year 2009, the Children's Trust Fund required Family Resource Centers to direct 50% of their grant award to

strategies aimed at families with multiple challenges, including mental health, substance abuse, child sexual abuse, and domestic violence.

On a quarterly basis, CTF holds a day-long meeting with the Family Resource Center Executive Directors to identify emerging trends and needs of children and families; identify barriers and inconsistencies in service delivery; and propose solutions on an individual and statewide basis.

***Strengthening Families Through Early Care and Education*** – CTF has been the lead agency in Wisconsin for the last five years on the national Strengthening Families Initiative. Strengthening Families believes that the early care and education system plays a unique role in the prevention of child maltreatment. The Initiative's aim is to build the protective factors among families who attend child care centers across the state and enhance the relationships between child welfare and early care and education. Since the launch of this initiative, CTF, in partnership with the Supporting Families Together Association has trained hundreds of child care providers across the state on working with families to build protective factors.

***Families Headed by Parents with Mental Health Issues*** – The Children's Trust Fund is funding Mental Health America to provide community specific training for Family Resource Centers and their partners in Brown and La Crosse Counties and with La Causa in Milwaukee County. The trainings cover general information about families dealing with mental health issues and specific information for direct service staff on working with families with mental illness. The goal of this work is to support these communities in developing a sustainable plan to comprehensively support parents with mental health challenges.

***Social and Emotional Development of Children*** – To improve the social and emotional development of young children, the Children's Trust Fund is funding the Wisconsin Alliance for Infant Mental Health to provide training to child welfare workers, child care providers, home visitors, and other professionals who interact with children and families on a regular basis. The training's focus is to promote healthy social and emotional development in young children and increase the parents' and other caregivers' ability to manage challenging behaviors.

***Respite Care*** – CTF is funding Respite Care Association of Wisconsin to prevent the initial occurrence of child maltreatment by targeting planned and emergency respite care to families that may exhibit risk factors. The Respite Care Association is establishing regional programs to deliver direct respite care services, developing guidelines/standards for programs and providers, and providing training and technical assistance. Five organizations are receiving direct service grants to expand respite care services.

***Cross Systems Coordination*** – This newly formed committee of the Board was created to identify existing and potential child maltreatment prevention initiatives within all state agencies and barriers to collaboration, gaps, inconsistencies, and conflicts between state systems. The committee will also put forward recommendations for better coordination of services; flexible, compatible and complimentary policies and procedures between agencies; and propose solutions to enhance prevention services in Wisconsin. The current committee membership includes the Department of Children and Families, Department of Corrections, Department of Health Services, Department of Public Instruction, the Governor’s Office, and the Chair of the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board.

One of the first charges of the Cross Systems Committee is a state prevention environmental scan. We are looking across state agencies, county human services and private foundations to get a better understanding of the programs that are being funded designed specifically to reduce child maltreatment. At the same time we are identifying other programs that indirectly contribute to the reduction of child maltreatment – like anti-poverty strategies, and mental health and substance abuse services. This will provide Wisconsin with a more comprehensive picture of where we are investing our resources and whether or not we are investing in programs that are proven to reduce child abuse and neglect; and make the case for reinvesting our limited resources in proven strategies. Our ultimate goal is to create a shared state agency and community prevention plan that will move us towards a more effective continuum of comprehensive prevention services in Wisconsin.

In 1998, the Board established the Celebrate Children's Foundation as a private foundation to promote investments in quality childhood and family development experiences to ensure an environment in which all Wisconsin children become healthy and productive citizens. The Foundation provides linkages between government and communities and between public and private resources and is committed to bold program and policy innovation.

The Foundation is directed by a 9-member board, including the chair and four members of the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board and four additional members.

The Foundation recently created an endowment with revenue from the sale of the Celebrate Children license plates. Money contributed to the Celebrate Children Foundation endowment is one vehicle to build sustainable investments in quality early childhood development experiences.

Most recently, the Celebrate Children Foundation supported training and technical assistance on family teaming as a core strategy to develop services for families who are experiencing real life challenges such as homelessness, poverty, job loss, inadequate parenting skills, domestic violence, or other problems that make it difficult to care for and parent their children. Our goal is to change the way systems help our families.

Family team meetings are a nationally recognized strategy to help families develop their own plan for addressing the circumstances that may put their children at risk for abuse or neglect. Experience with family team meetings in other states clearly demonstrates that challenged families can succeed with community support.

In addition, the Foundation recently received \$60,000 in private foundation grants, including \$25,000 from the Buffet Early Childhood Fund to host a series of key informant interviews on quality early care and education. The goal of this work is to gather valuable information from influential leaders and create a reliable assessment of the feasibility of a strong public private partnership to improve the quality of early care and education in Milwaukee and statewide.

Along with all of the work I just described, CTF is also looking at emerging and innovative areas of focus, especially given the dire economic situation that many of our families are facing.

Poverty is often times seen as the single best predictor of child abuse and neglect. Data compiled by the most recent *National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect*, conducted in the early 1990s, indicated that children from families with annual incomes below \$15,000 were over 22 times more likely to experience maltreatment than children from families whose incomes exceeded \$30,000. The results from the Fourth National Incidence Study, based on data collected over the last several years, are due out later this year. It is widely expected that the association between poverty and child maltreatment will be even stronger.

This does not imply that all or only low-income families abuse and neglect their children. Child abuse and neglect cuts across all income levels. What this does imply is that the stressors related to poverty combined with other risk factors, like mental health issues, substance abuse and domestic violence, can often times be so overwhelming and devastating that parents or caregivers resort to neglecting or abusing their children.

According to Steinberg and Dooley in *Economic Antecedents of Child Abuse and Neglect*, increases in child abuse were preceded by periods of significant job losses. Additionally, a wealth of research has shown that within low-income populations, various indicators of economic hardship – such as job loss, utility shut-offs, and housing instability – substantially increase the odds of a child maltreatment report.

Community-based child abuse prevention programs, like Family Resource Centers and our Community Response Pilot Programs offer proven strategies for providing much needed services for families feeling the stressors of poverty and unemployment, thus decreasing the risk of child abuse and neglect.

CTF is looking at innovative ways in which we can provide leadership to impact the role of poverty on child maltreatment. We have been engaging in strategic planning conversations with the Institute for Research on Poverty,

the Department of Children and Families, and Community Action Agencies on ways Wisconsin can prevent child maltreatment by addressing the economic instability of our low-income families.

The Family Policy Integration Board proposal accurately describes some real issues in service delivery for children and families. It is the position of the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board that CTF is already addressing many of the issues raised in the Family Policy Integration Board proposal. In addition, the Board has the capacity and statutory authority to address any other issues that the Governor, legislature or state agencies believe are gaps and intend to do so through our great partnership with the newly created Department of Children and Families. The Board also felt strongly that it needs to continue to focus efforts on providing more leadership and advocacy on its core mission of preventing child abuse and neglect.

It's critical that in these tough economic times that we focus our efforts, not on creating an additional layer of collaborative entities, but instead on how we can work together to creatively reinvest our very limited resources on programs and strategies that are proven effective so that we are truly enhancing the lives of children and families.

Now more than ever we must strengthen our investment in child maltreatment prevention and provide leadership on the importance of supporting Wisconsin families. We can't afford to continue only addressing deep end system flaws without looking at the real causes leading to why parents or caregivers abuse or neglect their children. We must do it together. Prevention is not the sole responsibility of some of us, but the collective responsibility of the entire state.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify this morning. I'm happy to answer any questions that you have.