

**Comments on bill drafts scheduled  
for August 13, 2009, meeting  
of the Special Committee on Strengthening  
Wisconsin Families  
by Public Member Jack Westman.**

**Comments on WLC: 0417/3 – Training for foster parents**

This draft is an important addition to the foster care process. Although foster parents receive an orientation, a more specific requirement that they receive formal training is needed. This does add a burden to some human services departments, but I believe it is necessary.

**Comments on WLC: 0416/2 – Bills of rights for foster children and parents**

The foster parents' "bill of rights" is a valuable addition to existing statutes pertaining to foster parents. These statutes specify the qualifications and responsibilities of foster parents but do not sufficiently deal with their rights. All too often foster parents are treated as if they did not have rights to information and to participation in the processes affecting their foster children. This draft redresses this omission.

A "bill of rights" also is needed for foster children themselves. This draft creates a useful set of rights that should be helpful to both foster parents and foster children. However, I do not believe that foster children should have rights that other children do not have. Specifically, I question the following provisions:

- (b) 4. *Unreasonable searches of personal belongings.* The state should not get into arguments between foster parents and foster children over what "reasonable" means. I recommend deletion of this item.
- (d) 2. *To make and receive confidential telephone calls....* Like other parents, foster parents must have control over communications between their foster children and other persons whether it be face-to-face or through technological devices. I recommend deleting this item.

I suggest that consideration also be given to a more formal exposition of the responsibilities of foster children, just as we have for foster parents. Here are some guidelines used by courts when dealing with parent-child relationships based on the expectation that children should reciprocate the responsibilities of their parents and foster parents. Like all children, foster children need to learn how to respond to benign authority in order to be able to interact comfortably and effectively with others. Courts expect children:

1. To learn the appropriate attitudes and values of their cultures and to act in accordance with them.
2. To accept parental authority and to behave in ways acceptable to the community.
3. To reciprocate the affection, confidence, and respect shown to them by their parents.

4. To cooperate with their parents in protecting themselves from danger and in meeting their own physical, emotional, and educational needs.
5. To help maintain family unity and reduce family tensions by cooperating and sharing with other members of their families and by showing loyalty to their families.
6. To perform appropriate tasks in their homes and to care for the material things provided for them.

**Comments on WLC: 0424/1 relating to youth who age out of foster care.**

This is a very important draft. The present policy of cutting off foster youth at the age of 18 does not make sense. This draft extends the age to 21 and sets forth conditions that minimize the possibility of youth exploiting foster care.

I do not understand the relevance of 4 (c).

**Comments on WLC: 0346/3 relating to creating a family policy board.**

In response to suggestions made over the last year, the current proposal by Wisconsin Cares, Inc., is to name the board the *Family Policy Integration Board*. Although the proposed Board could create family policies, its primary purpose would be to integrate family policies formulated by separate state agencies.

The proposed Family Policy Integration Board would expand the scope of the present Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board both in terms of membership and mission. It would not be a new creation that duplicates existing government structures. It would magnify the influence of the Department of Children and Families.

**History of the Wisconsin  
Family Policy Integration Board Proposal**

The Family Policy Integration Board proposal has been incubating in Wisconsin since the 1980s under the influence of emerging best professional practices, federal legislation, the experience of nineteen states (including Minnesota, Iowa, Michigan, Illinois, and Ohio) and local family resource integration efforts within Wisconsin.

**National Level**

The professional approach to child welfare has shifted from an ineffective child-saver/child-protection approach to an effective family strengthening approach.<sup>1</sup> In the process, recognition that the most important factor in a child's life is a thriving family has led to transforming *child welfare* into *family welfare* and to integrating resources for children and families.

Federal legislation over the last 30 years has been devoted to developing better ways of implementing family preservation concepts.<sup>2</sup> There also has been an emphasis on service integration and the timely termination of parental rights and adoption. The theme *strengthening families* has emerged as the most effective prevention and intervention approach to struggling families.

In the 1990s, a number of states received grants from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to create state/local family collaborative systems designed to respond to local needs for strengthening families. Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota, and Iowa are among the nineteen states that now have ten to fifteen years of experience with state/local collaborative systems. The Wisconsin Family Policy Integration Board proposal has been influenced by these states' experiences.

### **In Wisconsin**

The Wisconsin Family Policy Integration Board proposal has emerged through four venues.<sup>3</sup>

#### **1. *Localities***

The first venue is from communities through the Right From The Start Coalition. Ramon Wagner of Community Advocates in Milwaukee developed the first draft for a Family Policy Board in the 1980s. The Collaborative Systems of Care movement has continued this thrust through forming local collaboratives and a state Children Come First Advisory Committee. Many localities now have collaborative structures that could readily relate to an integrative state board.

#### **2. *State Department of Health and Family Services***

The second venue has been through the former state Department of Health and Family Services. Two previous Administrators of the Division of Children and Families, Frank Newgent and Bernard Stumbras, advanced the proposal as members of Wisconsin Cares, Inc. The present day application of the proposed Family Policy Integration Board would give the new Department of Children and Families a cross-system context and magnify its influence.

#### **3. *Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on State-Local Partnerships***

The third venue was the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on State-Local Partnerships for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (the Kettl Commission) that developed a number of recommendations in 2001 to improve communication between state agencies and localities.

#### **4. *Legislative Council Special Committee on Strengthening Wisconsin Families***

The fourth venue is the Joint Legislative Council Special Committee on Strengthening Wisconsin Families. In 2007, its first iteration began the process of developing recommendations to improve the effectiveness of state and local efforts to strengthen families.

### **Examples of Existing Wisconsin Panels**

The Governor's Cabinet consists of 18 members.

There are 69 state agencies and over 200 boards, councils, commissions, and task forces.

There are 82 boards.

A sampling of state panel membership is as follows:

Agriculture, trade, and consumer protection board - 9

Arts board - 15

Child abuse and neglect prevention board – 20

Emergency medical services board – 15

Higher educational aids board – 13

Land and water conservation board – 11

Medical College of Wisconsin Board of Trustees – 34

Medical examining board – 14

University Hospitals Clinics authority and board – 17

Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care - 31

The proposed Family Policy Integration Board would have 27 members

### References

1. National Human Services Assembly (2009) *Through a New Lens: Toward a Fundamental Reframing of “the Client.”* [www.nassembly.org/fspc](http://www.nassembly.org/fspc). March 21.

2. Mallon, Gerald P. & Hess, Peg McCartt (Eds.) (2005) *Child Welfare for the Twenty-First Century: A Handbook of Practices, Policies, and Programs*. New York: Columbia University Press.

3. Wisconsin Cares (2008) *A Plan for Strengthening Wisconsin Families through a State Family Policy Integration Board*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Cares, Inc.