



## **Special Committee on Permanency for Young Children in the Child Welfare System July 24, 2012**

**Presentation by: Colleen M. Ellingson, CEO, Adoption Resources of Wisconsin**

### **About Adoption Resources of Wisconsin:**

Adoption Resources of Wisconsin (ARW) has been working in partnership with the Wisconsin Dept. of Children and Families to help support adoption and foster care in Wisconsin since 1984. As a neutral organization we provide assistance across the state to both public and private agencies providing foster care and adoption services. We have three core areas:

1. Information and Referral services – provide general information about foster care and adoption, provide information to birth parents considering an adoption plan, provide assistance during the adoption and foster care process, provide resource referral information for families looking for mental health providers and other services.
2. Recruitment services – Provide assistance to DCF to find homes for waiting children through photolisting web services and “data mining” services that work to find and identify people that have been connected to the child while in foster care. Our “Turn a Life Around” campaign helps to recruit new foster families. We provide technical recruitment consultation to counties on their recruitment plans.
3. Training and support services – We provide technical assistance and support to foster and adoptive groups in the state. Webinar training is offered to both families and professionals. We have an extensive library of books and DVD’s that can be ordered through the web. We provide support to families through a home visitation or informational program in conjunction with Jockey International for families who have just adopted through the child welfare system.

ARW provides extensive information through its websites: [wiadopt.org](http://wiadopt.org), [wifostercareandadoption.org](http://wifostercareandadoption.org) and [wiadoptioninfocenter.org](http://wiadoptioninfocenter.org), [fosterparentsrock.org](http://fosterparentsrock.org).

### **Who are the adopted children in our state?**

Wisconsin has had a rich history of adoption both from the foster care system as well as internationally. Wisconsin has roughly 15,000 children who are currently under 18 years of age.

- International Adoptions – 6,813 adoptions from 1999-2011
- Child Welfare Adoptions – Over 8,000 children are currently receiving adoption assistance.

## **What are the challenges after adoption?**

Children who have moved multiple times, who have experienced neglect, abuse and trauma are vulnerable children. The effect of trauma often is manifested in behavioral issues that significantly challenge families who have made a forever commitment to children. These families are strong advocates for their children and seek all the professional assistance they can access. When ARW analyzed a group of children (whose parents we were training), we found that 41% of the children averaged two to four therapists by the time their families came to us for help. Twenty-five per cent had five or more therapists.

The *Evan B Donaldson Adoption Institute* developed a 2010 report “Keeping the Promise” reported that most adopted children, because of early deprivation or maltreatment, come to their new families with elevated risks for developmental, physical, psychological, emotional or behavioral challenges due to prenatal issues, early deprivation and other issues mentioned throughout this report. The utilization of clinical resources is about triple the rate reported by birth families.

## **Is this a serious issue for our state?**

Providing services to children who have been traumatized is an issue across the country. Penny Maza, (Retired, US Dept. of Human Services, ACF), reviewed national re-entry data on children who had been adopted. A significant majority of the children were teenagers. When these teens came back into care, two things happened:

- They were twice as likely to go into residential treatment or group care in comparison to children who were entering child welfare for the first time.
- They were also stayed twice as long in care as children coming into care for the first time.

A 2010 small snapshot of children in Milwaukee who had been adopted from child welfare showed that 3% of the children (70 children) in the June population as children were identified as being previously adopted. The average age of the children at re-entry was 14.5 years old. Nearly two-thirds of the children were from single-parent adoptive families. The majority of the children had emotional special needs; just over half were placed in group homes or residential care facilities. The kid's behavior (over 50%) was the driving reason why the children re-entered care. A more alarming statistic was that 28% also had new abuse as a re-entry issue.

What we need to understand as a state is that trauma effects and a child's history do not go away just because a family has committed to them. We are bringing in children with significant emotional, mental health and behavioral challenges into adoption.

The majority of healing and helping children grow happens right in the family.

## **Our Home Our Family – a specialized curriculum to help foster and adoptive families**

ARW has been providing help to families since we started in 1984. As the calls continued to come in from strong families who couldn't cope with their child's behaviors, we knew that we needed to create a program that would assist them relate better to their children – as well as to each other if they were a couple. Overwhelmed parents frequently question why they choose to adopt as well as why they personally agreed to adopt. They often experience severe marital stress.

From 2004-2009, we developed, trained and evaluated a program that we designed in conjunction with Loving Couples Loving Children, Inc., an organization that Dr. John Gottman developed based on his 30+ years of research on marital stability and relationships. The Our Home Our Family curriculum was developed specifically for families who foster or adopt. Couples received training in small groups with 6 ½ days of training over a number of months with assigned work in between. They were rigorously evaluated through testing by the University of Wisconsin, School of Educational Psychology with nationally recognized testing instruments at several points: pre-testing; post-testing; 3-month; 1 year and a cumulative test for all participants at the end of five years. The evidenced-based testing showed:

- Reduction in depression rate for parents that lasted one year after training
- Families felt more capable of dealing with their children's behaviors – 64% improvement
- Families understood that other adoptive families faced the same challenges – 99%
- Parents lost their temper less often – 50% reduction in times they lost their temper
- Only 1% of the families divorced in the five years

The children saw improvements as well:

- Children had less fights – Reduced fighting from every 7 weeks to every 16 weeks
- Children had fewer problems in school. Parents were called to school less often – 72% increase in the amount of time between calls
- Reduction in re-entry for the children in comparison to their re-entry rate prior to the training

### **What are some of the needs in our state?**

There are several strategies that Wisconsin can utilize to improve stability for children who have been adopted. Here are some recommendations:

- **Case management services** - Short-term support for families in crisis to find the resources they need within their community.
- **Mental health services** – We need to improve the training and requirements so that mental health providers are knowledgeable and using evidenced-based therapy.
  - Require foster care and adoption knowledge and competency for any therapist providing services to foster and adoptive children.
  - Trauma-informed care that is utilized by therapists with direct training for families in the techniques and knowledge they also need to help heal their children
  - Evidenced-based therapy that is shown to bring results.
- **Post Adoption training for families** – Families need to have training not only before they become adoptive parents – but also after. Short-term intensive training can help reduce re-entry.

### **Why should Wisconsin fund post adoption services?**

Post Adoption services have a high return on investment for our state and its counties. Consider these facts:

- Reduced re-entry into care
- Post adoption supports are “low-cost” in comparison to residential treatment and group care.
- More stable placements for children and increased learning in school
- Supported families will be more likely to adopt or foster again, as well as encourage others to do so.