



WISCONSIN LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

ADOPTION DISRUPTION AND DISSOLUTION

Room 413 North (GAR Room)
State Capitol

July 22, 2014
10:00 a.m. – 2:25 p.m.

[The following is a summary of the July 22, 2014 meeting of the Study Committee on Adoption Disruption and Dissolution. 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

Chair Kleefisch called the committee to order. The roll was called and a quorum was determined to be present.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS
PRESENT:

Rep. Joel Kleefisch, Chair; Rep. Frederick Kessler, Vice Chair; Reps. André Jacque, and Paul Tittl; Sen. Nikiya Harris Dodd; and Public Members Sam Benedict, Oriana Carey, Jill List, Mary Osgood, Ray Przybelski, Theresa Roetter, Jaclyn Skalnik, and Heather Yaeger.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS
EXCUSED:

Rep. LaTonya Johnson; and Public Member Mark Sanders.

COUNCIL STAFF PRESENT:

Anne Sappenfield, Principal Attorney; and Margit Kelley, Staff Attorney.

APPEARANCES:

Senator Luther Olsen, Co-Chair, Joint Legislative Council; Terry C. Anderson, Director, Legislative Council Staff; Susan Conwell, Executive Director, Kids Matter Inc., and Amanda Salas, Adopted Child; and Pat Ann St. Germain, MA, LPC, Director, Healing Hearts Family Counseling Center.

Opening Remarks by the Joint Legislative Council

Senator Luther Olsen, Co-Chair of the Joint Legislative Council, thanked the committee members for their willingness to serve and said that the work of being an adoptive parent is very important, but can be difficult.

Terry Anderson, Director of the Legislative Council Staff, welcomed the members of the Study Committee. Mr. Anderson introduced the Legislative Council staff members assigned to assist the committee and explained the general rules and guidelines for serving on study committees.

Introduction of Committee Members

Chair Kleefisch introduced himself and welcomed the committee members. Upon the Chair's request, members briefly introduced themselves.

Presentation by Susan Conwell, Executive Director, Kids Matter Inc., and Amanda Salas, Adopted Child

Ms. Conwell introduced herself as Executive Director of Kids Matter Inc., and an adoptive parent. She said that she had hoped to bring additional young adult adoptees to the meeting to speak but, indicative of the difficulties of the topic, they were asked by the agencies working with them not to come.

Ms. Salas read the testimony of an adoptee from Russia who was removed from her adoptive home after two years of abuse by her adoptive parents. She said that she was isolated from the family and was refused basic needs. Ms. Salas then told her own story of being adopted by an abusive stepfather's brother and suffering physical, emotional, and sexual abuse for seven years. She said that her family portrayed her to others as a troubled, mentally ill child, so her allegations of abuse were never believed when she sought help.

Ms. Conwell described cases in which a child is adopted by an older caregiver who dies or becomes too ill to care for the child. She said that Illinois requires an assessment prior to the adoption of the appropriateness of placements with caregivers over age 60 and a backup plan for children placed with older caregivers. Ms. Conwell said that the state's data system for child welfare cases does not have accurate information on adopted children who enter or return to the child welfare system, are runaways, or are put under another person's guardianship. She also said that the Department of Children and Families' data on out-of-home placements of children who have been adopted internationally is incomplete. Finally, Ms. Conwell mentioned that adoptive families may continue to receive adoption assistance after the child has left the home or is supporting him or herself. She said that this frustrates many children.

In response to questions from Chair Kleefisch, Ms. Conwell said that child protective services workers should be trained to better interview children who are alleging abuse in their

home in order to better understand the child's viewpoint. Also, she said that workers should not assume children have mental health issues as reported by their parents but should verify the child's mental health status.

Ms. Yaeger asked whether Ms. Conwell thought that the strict timelines under federal child welfare law to achieve permanency put pressure on the system. Ms. Conwell said that families are told that, if they do not adopt a child within a certain amount of time, the child will be placed elsewhere. She said that prospective adoptive parents need to know their rights so that they can have sufficient time to decide on whether an adoption is appropriate for their family.

**Presentation by Pat Ann St. Germain, MA, LPC, Director,
Healing Hearts Family Counseling Center**

In Ms. St. Germain's presentation, she provided information on the core issues of adoption, the needs of adoptive children, and the domains of some of those children's impairments. She said that the causes of adoption disruption relate to parental capacity, including expectations and the ability to adapt to what the child and family are experiencing, insight into what is going on with the child and in the family, and commitment to an enduring relationship with the child. She made the following recommendations:

- Better assessment of parental capacity. Currently, her clinic uses assessment tools for insightfulness and commitment.
- More training about different types of parenting.
- A recognition of the fact that parental history influences a parent's capacity to learn to parent in a new style. She noted that an attachment survey could be included in an adoptive home study.
- More intensive post-placement support.

A link to Ms. St. Germain's PowerPoint slides is available on the committee's website at: <http://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lc/study/2014/1189>.

After the presentation, Ms. Carey noted that families adopting a child through the child welfare system are given access to services, but that it is more difficult to identify and reach private adoption families. Ms. Yaeger agreed that these families need to reach out for help.

In response to a question from Mr. Benedict, Ms. St. Germain said that there is a lack of services outside of Milwaukee and Madison and that Wisconsin is generally behind in providing the most up-to-date types of services and counseling.

Mr. Przybelski asked how families can be reached earlier. Ms. St. Germain said that families should be assessed early on to determine if they are going to be a good placement and that there should be earlier intervention. She also recommended better tracking of families so

that if a family fails with one child, the agency is aware of that when considering placement of another child in that home.

Ms. Skalnik asked if families are more likely to seek private assistance instead of going back to the adoption agency for assistance. Ms. St. Germain said that families will go back to the agency if they have a strong connection with their adoption worker. She said some families are embarrassed to go back because they are ashamed about how the child is behaving and feel like they have failed.

Discussion of Committee Assignment

Chair Kleefisch asked committee members the specific issues they think the committee should consider. The following issues were mentioned:

- Assessment of adoptive parents and home studies.
- Information on post-adoption services in other states, recently compiled in a report prepared by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute.
- Training for individuals who make adoption placement decisions.
- Response to cases that fail, including identifying other resources for the child, such as the child's biological family, and barriers to using those other resources.
- Documentation for children, especially children who have been adopted from another country, including their birth certificate, Social Security number, and adoption papers.
- Tracking adoption disruption and dissolution and other data.
- Respite care for families.
- Identifying abuse or neglect in adoptive homes.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of various post-adoption services.
- Concurrently, assessing homes for parental capacity as foster parents and as adoptive parents in the child welfare system.

Plans for Future Meetings

The committee will meet at 9:00 a.m. on August 26, 2014.

Other Business

There was no other business.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 2:25 p.m.

AS:jal