



WISCONSIN LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

ADOPTION DISRUPTION AND DISSOLUTION

Large Conference Room
One East Main Street, Suite 401
Madison, WI

August 26, 2014
9:00 a.m. – 2:20 p.m.

[The following is a summary of the August 26, 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; Reps. André Jacque, LaTonya Johnson, and Paul Tittl; Sen. Nikiya Harris Dodd; and Public Members Sam Benedict, Oriana Carey, Jill List, Mary Osgood, Ray Przybelski, Theresa Roetter, Jaelyn Skalnik, and Heather Yaeger.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS EXCUSED: Rep. Frederick Kessler, Vice Chair; and Public Member Mark Sanders.

COUNCIL STAFF PRESENT: Anne Sappenfield, Principal Attorney; and Margit Kelley, Staff Attorney.

APPEARANCES: Susan Hubbell, Director, Bethany Christian Services of Wisconsin; Amy Steuer, Post Adoption Resource Center, Catholic Charities, Diocese of Madison; Janine Gruber, Special Needs Adoption Program, Children's Hospital of Wisconsin; Robert Haupt, former Director, Department of Human Services, Ozaukee County; Kim Van Hoof, Director, Department of Social Services, Langlade County; Verneesha Banks, Child and Family Training Consultant, and Diane Thompson, Program Coordinator, Wraparound Milwaukee; and Cecelia Klingele, adoptive parent.

Approval of the Minutes of the July 22, 2014 Meeting

The committee members unanimously approved the minutes of the July 22, 2014 meeting.

Presentation by Representatives of Licensed Adoption Agencies

Susan Hubbell, Director, Bethany Christian Services of Wisconsin; Amy Steuer, Post Adoption Resource Center, Catholic Charities, Diocese of Madison; and Janine Gruber, Special Needs Adoption Program, Children's Hospital of Wisconsin

Ms. Hubbell explained that in her current work with a private adoption agency, she has seen a shift in the processes and issues that arise particularly over the last four years in both international and domestic adoptions. She attributed the changes in large part to the Hague Convention requirements for intercountry adoptions and the increased prevalence of alcohol and drug dependency issues in domestic adoptions.

Ms. Hubbell stated that in response to these changes, her agency has focused on three aspects of the adoption process. First, the Structured Analysis Family Evaluation (SAFE) model is now used for their home study reports. She stated that the method is thorough in gauging a prospective family's strengths and limitations and that her agency considers this analysis to be a best practice in assessing each family. Second, the agency now requires 30 hours of pre-adoption education, which exceeds the state's requirement for 18 total hours. She stated that the education is offered in specific phases, with very little done online, and with the final phase geared towards the specific history of the adoptive child. Third, the agency has boosted its supports and interventions for adoptive families. Ms. Hubbell stated that this includes natural supports such as identifying mentors and involving families in informal social gatherings, and clinical supports such as ensuring the availability of a trained counselor.

Ms. Steuer described the difficulties of her work with one of the state's five post-adoption resource centers. In particular, she noted that many families do not know that the resource center services are available until the family is already in a crisis, when the resource center's referrals and information are inadequate to meet those needs. She stated that one way to better reach families sooner could be a mandatory referral from agencies of all families whose adoptions are finalized, which could be included in the checklist for agency licensure. Ms. Steuer also noted that state funding for the post-adoption resource centers has remained at the same level since their inception in 1994, and suggested that more could be done to reach out to adoptive families.

Ms. Gruber described her work with the special needs adoption program, and some of the system aspects that affect children. She noted that roughly 85% of special needs adoptions are by the same family that fostered the child and that during a child welfare case, the services are focused on the parent rather than the child. She said that after a child is available for adoption, the agency is asked to complete the home study and finalize the adoption within six

months, and once a child has been adopted, the child is no longer in the agency's system and there is no further contact by the agency with the child.

In response to a question from Ms. Carey, Ms. Steuer noted that most adoption agencies do not invite representatives of the post-adoption resource centers to speak during the educational sessions for pre-adoptive families, and that because it is not part of the culture, it is unlikely to be included in these sessions unless required by law.

In response to questions from committee members about the SAFE home study program, the speakers described it as a research-based evaluation, done over multiple stages, which is designed to give a more complete, analytical picture of the family's characteristics, capabilities, and their commitment to parenting. The speakers noted that the SAFE model is used by their three agencies, but not by the other nine licensed adoption agencies in the state. The speakers each recommended consistent use of the SAFE home study model in Wisconsin for all intercountry and domestic adoptions other than stepparent adoptions. They noted that the program could be a change for agencies and counties that do not currently use this method, but that because of its analytical nature, once the evaluation process becomes familiar, it is consistent and reliable.

Ms. Skalnik observed that, as with any evaluation method, the SAFE model relies on the prospective parent's honesty and forthrightness in responding to the questions. She noted that, because of this, one or two other states that use the SAFE model are adding a requirement, or have added a requirement, that one piece of the evaluation be done independently, separately from the agency's report.

Presentation by Representatives of County Departments of Human or Social Services

Robert Haupt, Former Director, Department of Human Services, Ozaukee County, and Kim Van Hoof, Director, Department of Social Services, Langlade County

Mr. Haupt commented that historically the number of dissolved adoptions has been small, but that even that small number comes at a great cost to taxpayers and a tremendous cost to the child who then has a difficult time moving past that failure. He noted that there is a culture in adoption work that once an adoption has been finalized that the work for the family is done.

Mr. Haupt described two cases to highlight some of the challenges in adoption. In one, an adoptive family disclaimed any responsibility for three adopted children who became disruptive in their teen years, causing over \$500,000 in mental health services and residential costs to the county. In the other, a child with a difficult history was successfully placed in foster care and the family chose not to adopt partially in order to maintain better access to services for the child and to maintain the child's relationship with her biological family, but because the child was not adopted, her permanency status is officially considered unsuccessful.

Mr. Haupt made a number of recommendations, including requiring prospective parents to meet with post-adoption service providers during the pre-adoptive education; identifying a coordinated service team of professional resources before an adoption is finalized; creating a process for post-adoption resource centers to meet and review the delivery of their services at regular intervals; and creating a medical home model of care for adopted children as a partnership between the child, the parents, the primary medical provider, specialists, and community supports.

Ms. Van Hoof emphasized the limited nature of post-adoption services, noting that the resource center in her area employs only a part-time person, and that when families do contact the county social services or the resource center, the family usually is already broken. In response to a question from Representative Jacque, she noted that post-adoption visits occur only during the first six months after a public adoption. Ms. Van Hoof suggested that an earlier connection between adoptive families and post-adoption resources would be valuable, along with periodic meaningful therapeutic assessments to determine the family's ongoing needs.

Ms. Van Hoof observed that providers and people across the system are often not adequately trained on trauma and adoption attachment issues.

Presentation by Representatives of Wraparound Milwaukee

Verneesha Banks, Child and Family Training Consultant, and Diane Thompson, Program Coordinator, Wraparound Milwaukee

Ms. Thompson described the characteristics of the current 32 children receiving services in the Wraparound Milwaukee program for whom the adoptive parents have stated that the children are not allowed to return home. She stated that those children range in age from nine to 19, but that most are 15 or 16; placements include 12 in group homes, six of the younger children in foster homes, two older children living independently, six in residential treatment, three in detention facilities, and two with their biological parents; and that diagnoses include ADHD, anxiety, oppositional-defiant disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other diagnoses, in roughly the same proportion as other children in the program. Ms. Thompson noted that of the children who were recently discharged from their program who were not allowed to return to their adoptive families, eight were sent to correctional placements, one is in a kinship guardian placement, one is in a long-term foster home, and one returned to a biological family member.

In response to a question from Ms. Skalnik, Ms. Thompson stated that she recalled only one of the 32 children in the program who are not allowed to return to the adoptive home as originating from an intercountry adoption and that the others originated in child welfare system adoptions.

Ms. Banks commented that the 32 children who are currently in the program and who are not allowed to return home reflect only the current number, and that the number has been

substantial over the years. She commented that there seems to be an attitude among some adoptive parents that if the relationship is not going well that the child can be “given back,” even when the child was adopted as an infant.

In response to questions from Chair Kleefisch, Ms. Banks stated that children from failed adoptions need long-term care or various types of institutionalization, which garners more attention on the issue. Ms. Thompson observed that there seems to be a trend to “fix the child,” rather than the mentality to “support the child.” Ms. Banks noted that by moving children quickly into permanency, the child’s support needs are not always understood at the time of adoption, and arise later when it is more difficult to access post-adoption services. Ms. Thompson noted that there is also a trend in more elderly parents adopting children, which can lead to additional suffering for the child when the parent dies or can no longer live at home. She also observed that some adoptive parents have their own mental health or drug or alcohol abuse issues, which can make it difficult for the parent to accept support from others in the adoption.

Ms. Thompson and Ms. Banks discussed a number of recommendations, including a more routine assessment of a child’s bonds with biological family members before a parental relationship is terminated; requiring trauma training for adoptive parents who are adopting children with that history even if the child is not exhibiting any related behavioral problems; allowing older children to search adoption records for biological family members before turning 18; and requiring an agency to look to the biological family for placement resources when there has been a disruption from an adoption.

Ms. Thompson noted that there is a cultural stigma against parents asking for help, and many parents feel ashamed in even asking for services. She noted that when an adoptive family reaches out to the program for services, the family is already broken.

Presentation by Adoptive Parent, Cecelia Klingele

Ms. Klingele described her experience as an adoptive parent of a child with special needs. In particular, she described the difficulties her family had in receiving accurate information at the time of adoption on the child’s needs, and the later difficulties in obtaining appropriate care and services for him. She noted that her son and the family are doing well now, but that during the most difficult behaviors that surfaced in the teen years, the problems were overwhelming and she was scared for her son and the family. She commented that the family survived only because she and her husband fought repeatedly to renew the care services for her son and were able to be creative in structuring that care. Ms. Klingele commented the family had been able to obtain the needed services because of their knowledge about the system and ability to advocate.

In response to a question from Ms. List, Ms. Klingele noted that the problem for some adoptive families is not a lack of love, but a lack of proper intervention, particularly for parents who do not know where to turn for help. She noted that asking for help has a negative stigma, which should be removed.

Plans for Future Meetings

The committee will next meet at 9:00 a.m. on September 23, 2014, in the large conference room of the Wisconsin Legislative Council. Chair Kleefisch announced that planned speakers include representatives of the Department of Children and Families, and Susan Livingston Smith of the Donaldson Adoption Institute. Chair Kleefisch also asked members to forward any suggestions for possible legislation ideas to committee staff, Ms. Sappenfield and Ms. Kelley.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 2:20 p.m.

MSK:jal