

June 22, 2021

Edward A. Blazel
Assembly Chief Clerk
Risser Justice Center
17 West Main Street, Suite 401
Madison, WI 53703

Mike Queensland
Senate Chief Clerk
B20 – Southeast, State Capitol
Madison, WI 53703

Dear Assembly Chief Clerk Blazel and Senate Chief Clerk Queensland:

In compliance with 2017 Wisconsin Act 260, grants to support foster parents and children in out-of-home care, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) provides this report for state fiscal years (SFY) 2019 and 2020. The data provided in this report includes the periods July 1, 2018 through June 30, 2019, and July 1, 2019 through December 31, 2020. Please note that, due to spending restraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the grant period for state fiscal year 2020 was extended until December 31, 2020, to allow agencies additional time to fully utilize their grant funding. This report details the evaluation of the effectiveness of the grant program for those fiscal years and fulfills the Department of Children and Families' reporting requirements pursuant to Wis. Stat. s. 20.437(1)(bg).

We appreciate the legislature's interest in Wisconsin's child welfare system and their commitment to supporting DCF, local child welfare agencies, and the hundreds of non-profit organizations who work to support and strengthen Wisconsin's children and families.

Background

2017 Wisconsin Act 260 provides \$400,000 in funding per fiscal year to DCF to support foster parents and normalcy opportunities for children in out-of-home care. Funds are distributed via competitive grant processes to provide agency funding in the following topic areas:

- Incentives for the retention of foster parents;
- Foster parent training activities; and
- Reimbursement for foster care related expenses that allow for normalcy opportunities for children in out-of-home care.

Agencies that received the grant were required to submit an exit summary demonstrating the effectiveness of the use of the awarded funds to the DCF in each fiscal year.

More information about this grant opportunity can be found in DSP Informational Memo Series 2020-22i available at, <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/policy/pdf/memos/2020-22i.pdf>.

Summary of Findings

The following is a summary of the effectiveness of the grant program.

Agencies

In both fiscal years, the grantees were selected according to standardized evaluation criteria. Due to the number of grant applications received and the limited funds available, agencies may have received only partial approval from the original amount requested.

In SFY 2019, 51 agencies applied for a grant. The department awarded 14 grants to the 22 agencies listed below:

- Brown County Health and Human Services
- Dane County Department of Human Services
- Foundations Health and Wholeness
- Grant County Department of Social Services
- Jackson County Health and Human Services
- Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians
- Marinette County Health and Human Services Department
- Northwoods Foster Care Community; a consortium consisting of the following agencies:
 - Oneida County Department of Social Services
 - Florence County Human Services Department
 - Forest County Social Services Department
 - Iron County Human Services Department
 - Langlade County Department of Social Services
 - Lincoln County Department of Social Services
 - Price County Health and Human Services
 - Vilas County Social Services Department
 - Taylor County Human Services Department
- Rock County Human Services Department
- St. Charles Youth and Family Services, Inc.
- Washington County Human Services Department
- Waushara County Department of Human Services
- Welcomed, Inc.
- Winnebago County Human Services

In SFY 2020, 52 agencies applied for a grant. The department awarded 12 grants to the 12 agencies listed below:

- Barron County Department of Health and Human Services
- Brown County Health and Human Services
- Catholic Charities of the Diocese of La Crosse
- Dane County Department of Human Services
- Jefferson County Health and Human Services
- La Causa Incorporated
- Marathon County Social Services
- Oneida Nation Family and Social Services
- Rock County Human Services Department
- St. Croix Tribal Health and Human Services
- Washington County Human Services Department
- Welcomed, Inc.

Activities

Agencies opted to implement various activities throughout each fiscal year under this grant to support the retention of foster parents, to reimburse foster parents for the cost of normalcy opportunities for children placed in out-of-home care, and to support the cost to implement foster parent training activities.

In SFY 2019, 14 grantees received a grant for incentives for the retention of foster parents; one grantee received a grant to reimburse for normalcy opportunities for children placed in out-of-home care; and one grantee received a grant to reimburse for foster parent training activities.

In SFY 2020, 12 grantees received a grant for incentives for the retention of foster parents; one grantee received a grant to reimburse for normalcy opportunities for children placed in out-of-home care; and zero grantees received a grant to reimburse for foster parent training activities. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the approved activities were amended to accommodate the need for events to occur in a virtual format.

Activities Implemented by Grantees		
	Fiscal Year 2019	Fiscal Year 2020
Foster Parent Retention Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciation and anniversary greeting cards and gifts • Appreciation events • Date night for foster parents with child care • Engage, train, support, and network churches at the local level to establish and maintain 'Care Communities' to support foster families • Family day for foster families • Foster parent and relative caregiver support and education groups • Foster parent mentoring programs • Placement closet/pantry for placement needs • Respite • Shared foster care website that can be utilized across agency staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciation and anniversary greeting cards and gifts • Appreciation events • COVID-19 activity baskets and kits • Engage, train, support, and network churches at the local level to establish and maintain 'Care Communities' to support foster families • Foster care on-call system (pilot) • Foster family of the month award and of the year award • Foster parent mentoring programs • Foster parent and relative caregiver support and education groups • Placement closet/pantry for placement needs • Respite
Normalcy Opportunities for Children Placed in Out-of-Home Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Band fees • Camp fees • Driver's education course • Graduation ceremony attire • Music equipment • Sports activities and equipment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birthday gifts • Camp fees • School dances • Sports activities and equipment
Foster Parent Training Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hired a training coordinator to manage training events for foster parents 	

Grant Funds Spent

The following table represents the total dollar amount that was allocated for each topic area and the amount that was spent in each fiscal year, as well as a summary of the full grant.

Foster Parent Retention Activities		
Fiscal Year	Funds Awarded	Funds Spent
2019	\$366,240	\$335,268
2020	\$396,554	\$340,608
Normalcy Opportunities for Children Placed in Out-of-Home Care		
Fiscal Year	Funds Awarded	Funds Spent
2019	\$27,000	\$11,872
2020	\$13,500	\$499
Foster Parent Training Activities		
Fiscal Year	Funds Awarded	Funds Spent
2019	\$6,760	\$2,119
2020	\$0	\$0
Grant Summary		
Fiscal Year	Total Funds Awarded	Total Funds Spent
2019	\$400,000	\$349,259
2020	\$410,054*	\$341,107

*The department utilized Adoption and Guardianship Incentive funds to award a total grant amount greater than \$400,000.

Successes

Grantees noted many successes of this grant. Agencies that received grant awards reported that their licensed foster parents felt more connected, supported, and valued by their agency. Foster parents also credited the support of their agency through various grant activities as a valuable resource, which allowed their family to remain positive about the foster parent experience and to choose to continue providing their home as a safe and secure placement option for children in out-of-home care.

The most effective resource for recruitment of new foster homes is individuals who themselves have had a positive experience fostering. When licensed foster parents speak positively about foster care in their communities to interested families, friends, neighbors, and community members, others are encouraged to become licensed foster parents as well. One of the main mechanisms to ensure licensed foster parents have a positive experience fostering is to provide sufficient support to those foster families. Due to the increased retention activities funded by this grant, agencies have reported an increase in foster care inquiries, which they have attributed to the general positivity amongst their foster care community.

Agencies have also reported an increase in community and networking amongst their foster parents and child welfare staff. Foster parents have had the opportunity to meet and network at various grant-funded activities with other foster parents, as well as an opportunity to talk with the agency's staff in a more informal setting which has contributed to improved relationships and communication between foster parents, staff, and child and family teams. Agencies have found that this grant contributed to growth in the richness of their foster care community.

In addition to growth within agencies, grantees have also reported increased connections with their community partnerships through collaboration with various community organizations to implement activities funded through this grant. Agencies have been able to develop partnerships and increase foster care awareness in the community through these events.

Agencies have also been able to utilize grant funds to either create or expand current foster care programs, such as mentoring programs and placement closets. Additionally, agencies reported that these funds were essential in providing supportive activities to their foster parents. These funds also gave agencies the opportunity to focus increased support during the beginning months of the COVID-19 pandemic by providing families with activity baskets, food, household essentials, and other needed items that they would have otherwise been unable to provide during an extreme time of need within families and communities.

Lastly, agencies reported no increase to the number of foster parents choosing to close their foster home license. In fact, the most common reason for closure during the grant periods was the result of the child(ren) placed in the home reaching permanency either through guardianship or adoption with the foster parent(s), or through reunification with their own parent(s) or guardian(s). Foster home licensure closure as the result of permanence, while the agency may no longer have this home as a resource, is a positive outcome. Additionally, because agencies have experienced an increase in foster care inquiries as a result of this grant, these inquiries should offset the number of foster homes closing due to permanence being achieved.

Challenges

The consistent challenge reported by grantees was the inability and difficulty to appropriately spend all of their grant award. Agencies reported this challenge as a result of the restrictiveness of the grant related to the specific topic areas. In SFY 2019, there was under spending totaling \$50,741; and in SFY 2020, the underspending totaled \$68,947. The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated the ability for agencies to utilize the grant funds in SFY 2020. As a result, the grant period for SFY 2020 was extended until December 31, 2020, to allow agencies additional time to fully utilize their grant funding. However, even with this additional time, significant underspending remained.

Agencies found it especially difficult to utilize their grant award to reimburse for normalcy opportunities for children placed in out-of-home care. Children and youth in out-of-home care have the right to have a normal childhood and adolescence. It is the responsibility of those involved in their lives to create as much normalcy as possible. Normalcy is the ability to easily engage in healthy and developmentally appropriate activities that promote well-being such as social, scholastic, and enrichment activities. Age and developmentally appropriate activities, such as birthday parties, having a part-time job, or recreational activities, which should be considered normal for any child, are decisions that an out-of-home care provider can make for a child placed in their care. However, agencies reported that while normalcy activities are an important aspect for all children, they experienced challenges utilizing these funds specifically due to the nature of how these activities were reimbursed for foster parents via the Uniform Foster Care Rate. Additionally, agencies found it challenging to reimburse for normalcy activities for younger children who may have fewer activities to participate in.

Agencies also found it challenging to utilize this grant to reimburse for foster parent training activities. Agencies reported that the funds allocated for foster parent training expenses were moderately effective. Grantees reported that it was often difficult for foster parents to attend the trainings as scheduled, citing training dates, times, and travel as barriers to the success of trainings.

Agencies also reported that after several attempts to schedule trainings, many were cancelled due to low numbers of foster parents who had registered.

Lastly, grantees reported the fewest challenges in utilizing grant funds toward foster parent retention activities. However, in each SFY underspending still occurred. In SFY 2019, there was under spending totaling \$30,972 for retention activities; and in SFY 2020, the underspending totaled \$55,946. Agencies reported challenges related to activities not occurring as planned or experiencing fewer expenditures for planned activities. Because these grant funds must be spent within the contract cycle and cannot carry over into subsequent contracts or departmental programs, the department was unable to utilize these funds in any other way and they were, unfortunately, left unspent.

In closing, thank you for the opportunity to provide the above information and for your continued commitment and work to support foster families and children living in out-of-home care in Wisconsin. It has been inspiring and exciting to see foster parent retention activities, training, and normalcy opportunities being explored by agencies across the state. Feel free to contact the department with questions or clarification requests.

Sincerely,



Emilie Amundson
Secretary

cc: Governor Tony Evers