



Levels of Care Reference Guide: Licensed Foster Homes



Division of Safety and Permanence

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Historical

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) Implemented the Level of Care (LOC) initiative on January 1, 2010. Changes to federal and state laws, along with additional factors related to placement of children in out-of-home care, contributed to the implementation of Levels of Care for a person licensed as a foster parent to operate a foster home pursuant to [Wisconsin Statute s. 48.62\(1\)](#) and [Wis. Admin. Code Ch. DCF 56](#).

Levels of care aims to create consistency in foster home licensing statewide. It also aims to improve stability, safety, matching, and permanence of children by matching their assessed needs with the skills, abilities, and capacities of caregivers.

Building Family Based Environments

Since 2018, Wisconsin has been progressively working toward transitioning the child welfare system to become more in-home, family-focused, and collaborative. The shift in the system began when research indicated that children and families have better results when supported jointly. This transformation is focused on keeping families and children together by serving them in-home with resources and services. If a child is placed outside of their home, they should be placed in a family environment. First relative caregivers and like-kin caregivers are explored and prioritized as a placement resources. Relatives can become licensed as a foster parent at any level of care when they meet licensing requirements, or they can receive court-ordered kinship care, or remain as an unlicensed-relative caregiver. When a relative or a like-kin caregiver is not available, non-relative foster care is explored. Any caregiver becomes licensed as foster parent would be licensed at a level or care, or certification based on their relationship to the child, qualifications, training, references, and experience.

Prioritization with Relatives/Like-Kin

- When a child cannot safely remain in their home, every effort should be made to place the child with a relative or like kin caregiver.
- **Relative and like-kin caregivers may be certified at any level of care with a child specific license.** Licensing agencies should review the expectations and benefits of each level of care certification with relative and like-kin caregivers.
- Relative and like-kin caregivers can become licensed as a child specific foster homes at any level and receive increased support by their agency.
- When relative or like-kin placements are not possible, the next preference is with foster families within the child's community.



A relative caregiver may apply for foster care license at any time. The levels of care, foster care licensing initiative, does not require all relatives to be licensed in order to have placement of a child through the child welfare system. However, relative caregivers are increasingly becoming licensed as foster parents, are completing foster parent training, and are receiving increased support by their child welfare agencies.

Placements that do not Require Foster Care Licensure and LOC

ICPC placements in which WI is not making a Kinship Care payment and guardianship cases in which there is no order giving the Department or county "Placement and Care Responsibilities" are NOT REQUIRED to go through the foster care licensing process. In addition, relative caregivers receiving court ordered kinship care, that do not meet foster home licensing requirements, are NOT REQUIRED to go through the foster care licensing process.

Children placed under a Tribal Court-Order receiving court-ordered kinship payments are *exempt* from Foster Care licensing requirements and levels of care since DCF has no authority over other sovereign nations and cannot require a tribe to license a provider. Please refer to DCF Memo Series 2010-05: [Levels of Care Initiative- Applicability to Tribes](#). Tribes that license their own foster homes are not subject to Wis. Admin. Code ch. DCF 56 and license in accordance with their tribal codes and any federal standards that apply to them.

An unlicensed/unpaid relative placement may be receiving Social Security payments for the child that would exceed the amount of a foster care payment, or they do not wish to or need to receive payment. In these instances, the relative caregiver is NOT required to go through the foster care licensing process. There are no changes to current practice, child welfare professionals still must complete background checks and confirm safety of the OHC Placement (which includes a review of the physical environment, capacity of the caregivers to care for the child).

An unlicensed non-relative provider must be licensed as a foster parent within 30 days with one 30-day extension allowable, if granted by the court. The LOC initiative had no impact on this statutory requirement. There are no changes to current practice, agencies still must complete background checks and confirm safety of the OHC Placement (which includes a review of the physical environment, capacity of the caregivers to care for the child, and the match of the child and the caregiver) and license the provider if the child is going to remain in this home.

The Kinship Care program also has a component in which there is no court order involved placing the child into out-of-home care, this is known as **Voluntary Kinship Care**. Relatives receiving funding as a Voluntary Kinship Care case do not qualify for foster care licensure and are not required to go through the foster care licensing process.

Levels of Care Certification Requirements and Descriptions

There are five Levels of Care (LOC). All foster parents are given a Level of Care certification during the foster care licensing process based on the following:

- Qualifications
- Training
- Foster parent references
- Foster parent experience

Each of the five Levels of Care Certifications has been assigned a specific number of training hours, personal references, and experience requirements.

The applicant or licensee shall be involved in deciding which Level of Care Certification to pursue. Additional information regarding the certification levels pursuant to [Wis. Admin Code s. DCF 56.13](#).

The applicant must complete training requirements in accordance with their Level of Care certification. Training requirements fall into three categories: pre-placement, initial licensing, and ongoing.

A foster parent's Level of Care certification does not need to match the child's Level of Need. When the child's Level of Need is higher than the providers Level of Care, agencies provide additional services and resources to support the placement. The Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) tool will help determine the type of service provision needed to support a placement at a lower assessed level for a child.

Level 1: Child Specific Foster Home

Level 1 certification is reserved for *child-specific licenses only*. To be a child-specific foster parent, they must meet one of the following criteria:

- A relative of the child OR
- Have a prior relationship with the child or the child's family.

Caregivers may have a child-specific license at any level. There are no prior experience requirements or references required for a Level 1 certification.

Level 2: Basic Foster Home

Level 2 foster care is referred to as basic or "general" foster care. These applicants are required to provide 3 favorable references from non-related individuals. Most foster homes statewide are licensed at this level.

Level 3: Moderate Treatment Foster Home

Level 3 certification is considered moderate treatment foster care, which is foster care that can provide additional supervision and care to children with higher needs than those in basic foster care. Level 3 applicants must submit three favorable references from non-related individuals and one favorable reference from a relative, preferably an adult child. Level 3 foster parents are also required to meet **three** of the prior experience requirements

- A minimum of 1 year of experience as a foster parent or kinship care provider (with a child placed in the home for at least 1 year)
- A minimum of 5 years of experience working with or parenting children

- A minimum of 500 hours of experience as a respite care provider
- A high school diploma or the equivalent
- A college, vocational, or technical advanced degree in an area related to a child’s treatment needs such as nursing, medicine, social work, or psychology
- A previous existing relationship with the child through professional or personal experience
- Work or personal experience demonstrating the knowledge, skills, ability, and motivation to meet the needs of a child with a level of need of 3

Level 4: Specialized Treatment Foster Care

Level 4 is considered specialized treatment foster care, which is structured to meet the higher needs of children and often addresses specific population needs, such as teen parents or youth with sexually aggressive behaviors. Level 4 applicants must submit three favorable references from non-related individuals and one favorable reference from a relative, preferably an adult child. Level 4 foster parents are also required to meet **four** of the prior experience requirements:

- A minimum of 1 year of experience with children who have a Level of Need of 3 as a foster parent or kinship care provider
- A minimum of 5 years of experience working with or parenting children
- A minimum of 500 hours of experience as a respite care provider
- A high school diploma or equivalent
- A college, vocational, or technical advanced degree in an area related to a child’s treatment needs, such as nursing, medicine, social work, or psychology
- A previous existing relationship with the child through professional or personal experience
- Work or personal experience demonstrating the knowledge, skills, ability, and motivation to meet the needs of a child with a level of need of 4

Level 5: Exceptional Treatment Foster Care

Level 5 is considered exceptional treatment foster care and is also referred to as “shift-staffed” foster care. Children in Level 5 Foster Homes have higher needs than children placed in foster homes with lower Level of Care Certifications. When considering whether a child is appropriate to be placed in a Level 5 Foster Home, consider whether the circumstances pursuant to [Wis. Admin. Code s. DCF 56.13\(7\)\(a\)](#) exist, and that all the conditions below are applicable to the child. Level 5 Foster Homes may not provide care for more than 4 children.

- Child requires 24-hour awake care by staff,
- Child would benefit from a home-like environment,
- Child would benefit from fewer children than a group home or residential care center,
- The child is expected to need long term care **OR**
- The child has needs agreed to by the department
- All other community placement options have been investigated and determined unavailable or not in the best interest of the child.

Agencies must seek approval before pursuing certification or placement in a Level 5 Foster Home.

The [Level 5 Exceptional Treatment Foster Home Guide to Certification and Placement](#) should be referred to and used when a licensing agency is exploring development of a Level 5 Exceptional Treatment Foster Homes.

Levels of Care Certification Training Requirements

There are three types of training that foster parents must complete in relation to their Level of Care certification: **pre-placement, initial licensing, and ongoing training**. [Wisconsin Admin. Code s. DCF 56.13](#) designates the specific training required for each Level of Certification, while [Wis. Admin. Code s. DCF 56.14\(5\)](#) details the requirements of pre-placement training, initial licensing, and ongoing training based on the foster’s home Level of Care certification. Each foster parent must complete training requirements specific to their Level of Care certification.

Pre-Placement Training

Pre-Placement training provides an overview of the child welfare system and the foster care program, such as expectations of foster parents, caring for children in foster care, developing and maintaining family connections, and caregiver self-care. For Level 1 foster parents, Pre-Placement training can be completed before or after the placement of a child but no later than 6 months after the date of initial licensure.

For foster parents who are Levels 2, 3 or 4, Pre-Placement training may be completed before or after initial licensure but prior to the placement of any child in the home. If the license is child-specific, they must complete the training no later than 6 months after the date of initial licensure.

For a Level 5 certification, a program manager must complete the Pre-Placement training before or after initial licensure, but prior to the placement of any child in the home. Each program staff person must complete the Pre-Placement training before working independently with a child.

Initial Licensing Training

Initial Licensing training is the next step in foster parent training and is meant to provide a solid foundation of education on issues relevant to foster care and the children involved in the child welfare system.

Initial Licensing training goes into more detail about issues that are introduced in the Pre-Placement training, such as permanency, culture, child development, family connections, child abuse and neglect, trauma, attachment, discipline, access to resources, crisis management, birth family connections, and the effects of fostering on the family. Initial Licensing training is completed in the initial licensing period. There are a specific number of initial licensing hours required for each Level of Care certification.

Ongoing Training

Ongoing training is offered on a continual basis to provide education on topics relevant to the specific children in the home. Ongoing training is an opportunity to explore areas of interest to the foster parent and to learn more about how to meet the needs of the children placed in the home. Ongoing training must be completed in each 12-month period of licensure subsequent to the initial licensing period.

Ongoing training can be completed in various ways, and may include:

- Classes and other training methods.
- Books or periodicals.
- Web-based presentations.
- Attendance at support groups with other foster parents.
- Consultation with professionals with expertise in specific identified areas.

The total credit given for training using books, periodicals, and web-based resources, television, and radio presentations may not exceed 20 percent of the required hours.

Each foster parent is required to have an Individualized Training Plan pursuant to [Wis. Admin Code s. DCF 56.14\(8\)\(a\)](#) which will help the licensing professional to monitor the foster parent's training and tailor their education to better meet the needs of the children in their care.

Foster Parent Training Requirements Chart

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Foster Care Overview	Pre-Placement: DCF 56.13(3)(b) 6 Hours	Pre-Placement: DCF 56.13(4)(a)1 6 Hours	Pre-Placement: DCF 56.13(5)(b)1 36 Hours	Pre-Placement: DCF 56.13(6)(b)1 40 Hours (4 of those hours must be child-specific)	Pre-Placement: DCF 56.13(7)(e)5 40 Hours (4 of which must be child or population specific)
Expectations of Foster Parents					
Caring For Children in Foster Care					
Developing and Maintaining Family Connections					
Caregiver Self Care					
Permanency	Initial Licensing: Not Required	Initial Licensing: DCF 56.13(4)(a)2 30 Hours (to be completed during the initial licensing period)			
Cultural Dynamics in Placement					
Child Abuse and Neglect					
Impact of Maltreatment on Child Development					
Attachment					
Separation and Placement					
Importance of Maintaining a Child's Family Connections					
Guidance and Positive Discipline					
Access to Resources					
Crisis Management	Not Required	Not Required	Initial Licensing: DCF 56.13(5)(b)2 24 Hours	Initial Licensing: DCF 56.13(6)(b)2 30 Hours (6 of those hours must be child or population specific)	Initial Licensing: DCF 56.13(7)(e)6 30 hours each year of licensure beyond the initial year of licensure
Sexuality and Sexual Development					
Sexual Abuse					
Effects of Maltreatment and Trauma on Child Development					
Building Life Skills					
Building Birth Family and Cultural Connections					
Other topics required by licensing agency					
	Ongoing Training: Not Required	Ongoing Training: DCF 56.13(4)(a)3 10 hours each year of licensure beyond the initial licensing period	Ongoing Training: DCF 56.13(5)(b)3 18 hours each year of licensure beyond the initial licensing period	Ongoing Training: DCF 56.13(6)(b)3 24 hours each year of licensure beyond the initial licensing period (8 of those hours must be child or population specific)	Ongoing Training: DCF 56.13(7)(e)7 24 hours each year of licensure beyond the initial year of licensure (8 of those hours must be child or population specific)

* Program Staff working in a Level 5 Foster Home are required to have pre-placement training and ongoing training pursuant to [Wis. Admin. Code s. DCF 56.13\(7\)\(f\)10](#). Training provided should be specific to the child placed in the home and their needs. For homes licensed with at a level 5, agencies should reference DCF-P5251 [Level of Exceptional Treatment Foster Home Guide to Certification and Placement](#).

Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) Tool

The Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) is a multi-purpose tool developed to support decision making, including level of care and service planning, to facilitate quality improvement initiatives, and to allow for the monitoring of outcomes of services. The CANS tool assesses a child's needs and strengths in different areas such as school, trauma, mental health needs, and risk behaviors. In addition, to looking at the child, the Wisconsin version of the CANS assesses the child in relation to the Current Caregiver and the Identified Permanent Resource(s). The information is used to inform placement decisions, to identify services that may need to be put into place, or to identify specific items that may need to be planned around.

The CANS uses algorithms to provide three different results:

- **Level of Need (LON):** The recommended placement level for the child based on their identified needs and strengths. The LON does not prescribe a placement for a child but makes recommendations (please see the Placement Complexity Chart).
- **Mental Health Screen:** States whether or not the child needs to be seen by a mental health professional.
- **Supplemental Rate:** Calculates the supplemental portion of the foster care rate based on ratings of '2' or '3' on specific items. The supplemental portion of the foster care rate is calculated by adding up the items rated a '2' or '3' and multiplying them by the supplemental rate multiplier.

The CANS is completed by the child's primary child welfare professional however, foster care licensing code requires the child welfare professional to collect information from members of the child's treatment team. The CANS can only be completed by an individual who has been trained and certified in its use. Re-certification is required on an annual basis.

The department's policy requires that all children who were placed into foster care on or after

February 21, 2011, have a CANS completed within 30 days of placement into a foster home, and have a CANS reassessment every six months. The foster parent(s) or other members of the child's treatment team can request a reassessment of the CANS at any time if they feel that the child's needs or strengths have changed.

The CANS is a communication tool is used to:

- Communicate information about the needs and strength of the child and child's family.
- Assist with determining the child's service needs and developing the child's care plan.
- Determine a level of need for the child.
- Inform decisions regarding a placement at a level of care that is appropriate to meet the child's level of need.
- Evaluate the match between the knowledge, skills, and abilities of an out-of-home care providers and the needs and strengths of the child.
- Assist in the development of services and supports needed for a specific child and out-of-home care providers to promote the stability of the placement.
- Provide a mental health screen to all children in out of home care.
- Determine any supplemental payments pursuant to Wis. Admin. Code s. DCF 56.23(2).

The CANS helps to facilitate consensus within your treatment team by sharing the ratings with the team and ensuring that all members are in agreement with the assessment. Information about the needs and strengths of the child and the child's family should be communicated with the treatment team. Discussions about agreement on how the child's needs and strengths are described provides the foundation for agreement about what approaches to take to address those needs and identify and build strengths.

A specific Level of Need does not require a specific provider or placement, but it will be used to help choose a placement based on the child's identified needs. A child may be placed with a provider who has a lower level of certification than the Level of Need if an exception is documented to show additional supports will be given to that provider. The Level of Need will be used to better match children to their providers and to improve the stability of placements.

Additional information about the CANS and resource links are listed at the end of this guide. [Wisconsin Admin. Code s. DCF 56.22](#) provides additional information regarding the CANS.

Providers Level of Care (LOC) and Child Level of Need (LON)

Throughout this guide, Levels of Care (LOC) and Level of Need (LON) have been discussed. They aim to create consistency in foster home licensing statewide and matching children with caregivers based on their assessed needs and the caregiver's skills, abilities, and capacity. The placement complexity chart below provides a visual of how the level of care system is intended to be utilized when determining the most appropriate placement setting for a child based on their needs. A foster parent's Level of Care certification does not need to match the child's Level of Need. If a foster parent's LOC is lower than the child's LON, this may indicate that the foster parent may need additional supports or services to meet the child's needs.

Placement Complexity Chart

		Placement Options		
Child's Level of Need (LON)	Provider's Level of Certification (LOC)	Foster Home	Group Home	Residential Care Center
1/2	1	Child-Specific		
	2	Basic		
3	3	Moderate Treatment	Group Home	
4	4	Specialized Treatment		
5	5	Exceptional Treatment		Residential Care Center
6	6			
	This level of care may be used in transition planning for youth who were previously placed in a higher level of care.			
	Placement of children at this level is not appropriate.			
NOTE: A child in out-of-home care can be served by a placement with a certification level (or its equivalent) lower than the child's level of need if an exception has been granted and documented in the child's electronic case record by the placing agency and the agency shows what services and supports will be provided to meet the child's needs.				

Uniform Foster Care Rates

The Uniform Foster Care Rate (UFCCR) is a standard scale of monthly payments to foster parents with a level of care certification 2-5 for the cost of caring for a foster child. The foster care licensing agency will provide foster parents with a copy of a [Uniform Foster Care Rate Setting Brochure](#) explaining the Uniform Foster Care Rate, reimbursement amounts, clothing allowances, and how to appeal the foster care rate. Foster parents licensed at a level 1 certification are not eligible for the supplemental rate, exceptional rate, or clothing allowance.

There are four parts of the Uniform Foster Care Rate:

- Basic Maintenance Rate
- Supplemental Rate
- Exceptional Rate
- Initial Clothing Allowance

Components of the Uniform Foster Care Rate	
Basic Maintenance Rate	<p>The basic maintenance payment is dollar amount based on the age of the foster child and set by the legislature. The basic rate is used to reimburse foster parents for the basic expenses of caring for a foster child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food, • clothing, • housing, • basic transportation, • personal care, and • other expenses. <p>All licensed foster parents are eligible for the Basic Maintenance Rate.</p>
Supplemental Rate	<p>Additional monthly payment based on the emotional, behavioral, or physical needs of the foster child that exceed normal child development and expectations.</p> <p>Determined on a case-by-case basis by completing an assessment, called the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths Tool (usually just called CANS) for each child. The CANS looks at:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The strengths of a child and their family • The needs for the child in a lot of different areas of their lives, such as school development, behavior, and trauma <p>Only licensed foster parents certified as a level 2 or higher are eligible for the supplemental payments.</p>
Exceptional Rate	<p>Additional monthly payment to support the care of a foster child whose level of needs may be so significant that the reimbursements described above will not provide enough resources for foster parents to care for the child.</p> <p>Foster parents who get an Exceptional Rate payment are providing care for children who are at-risk of placement in higher level out-of-home care settings.</p> <p>Only licensed foster parents certified as a level 2 or higher are eligible for the exceptional payments.</p>

Publications, Memos and Resources

Publications

Wisconsin Admin. Code Ch. DCF 56	https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/code/admin_code/DCF/021_099/56.pdf
Levels of Care: Foster Care Licensing Brochure DCF-P-2544	https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/code/admin_code/DCF/021_099/56.pdf
Levels of Care Desk Guide DCF-P-5609	https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/5609.pdf
Uniform Foster Care Rate Setting Policy DCF-P-5611	https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/5611.pdf
Uniform Foster Care Rate Setting Brochure DCF-P-PFS0142	https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/0142.pdf
CANS Desk Guide DCF-P-5561	https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/fc/pdf/cans/cans-deskguide.pdf

Numbered and Informational Memos

DSP Info Memo 2010 – 03i: Levels of Care Foster Care Licensing Initiative	https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/policy/pdf/memos/2010-03i.pdf
DSP Memo Series 2010 – 05: Levels of Care Initiative – Applicability to Tribes	https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/policy/pdf/memos/2010-05.pdf
DSP Memo Series 2011 – 10: Levels of Care Foster Care Licensing Initiative	https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/policy/pdf/memos/2011-10.pdf
DSP Memo Series 2012 – 01: Applying Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths Assessment (CANS) to Group Homes and Residential Care Centers	https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/policy/pdf/memos/2012-01.pdf
DSP Informational Memo Series 2012 – 09i: CANS Certification Process	https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/policy/pdf/memos/2012-09i.pdf
DSP Numbered Memo Series 2012 – 11: Uniform Foster Care Rate Setting	https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/policy/pdf/memos/2012-11.pdf

Additional Resources

Foster Care Coordinator Pre-Service Training	https://care.wcwps.wisc.edu/foster-parent-pre-placement/
Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) Frequently Asked Questions	https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/fc/pdf/cans/faq.pdf
Child Welfare Portal- Child and Adolescent Needs (CANS) and Strengths Assessment Tool	https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/cans