

STATE OF WISCONSIN  
Department of Health and Family Services  
Division of Children and Family Services

To: Area Administrators/Assistant Area Administrators  
Bureau Directors  
County Departments of Community Programs Directors  
County Departments of Developmental Disabilities Services Directors  
County Departments of Human Services Directors  
County Departments of Social Services Directors  
Section Chiefs/Licensing Chiefs  
Tribal Chairpersons/Human Services Facilitators

From: Burnie Bridge  
Administrator

Re: Placement of Siblings in Out Of Home Care and Adoption

In addressing the issue of achieving permanence for children identified in the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), this Division agreed to issue guidance on documenting any efforts to place siblings together. This memo assists agencies in documenting sibling placement or separation, discusses valid reasons for separating siblings in out-of-home care settings, and provides information about applying the foster care exceptional rate for sibling groups. For the purposes of this document, siblings are defined as two or more persons who have at least one parent in common.

### **Background**

This memo seeks to effectuate the legislative purpose of Chapter 48 that directs the courts and agencies to preserve the unity of the family and to strengthen family life. While the focus of child welfare is often on the parent-child relationship or the child-to-another-related-adult relationship, sibling relationships are central to family unity and may be the strongest bonds in a child's life.

Children removed from their parents and placed into out-of-home care often experience extreme loss and trauma as a result of being separated from their families. In addition, siblings who are separated from one another when they are placed in out-of-home care lose an additional critical relationship in their lives, adding to their emotional burden at a difficult time. Siblings who are separated may experience multiple placements because they engage in negative behaviors that disrupt placements in an effort to be reunited with their siblings.

While it is not always possible to reunite parents and children, keeping siblings together in out-of-home care or in permanent placements addresses the goals of preserving the unity of the family and of strengthening the family that are identified in Wisconsin's Children's Code.

### **Procedure When Placing Siblings**

It is recognized that children must at times be placed on an emergency or short term basis in an available and safe placement, where it may not be possible to place siblings together. However, before placing a child in a planned placement, particularly one that is potentially long term, it is recommended that out-of-home care caseworkers: 1) determine whether a child has a sibling who is already in out-of-home care or is entering out-of-home care at the same time as the child, by seeking information from parents or other caretakers; 2) complete a search using both parents or guardians through e-WiSACWIS; 3) review any agency files on the child or family; and 4) contact other child welfare agencies if research indicates that the family may have had contact with a child welfare agency elsewhere in the state. It is recommended

that all efforts made by the agency to locate siblings be documented in the case file.

### **Use of Exceptional Rate to Support the Placement of Siblings in Foster Care and Treatment Foster Care**

The Uniform Foster Care Rate to reimburse foster parents, treatment foster parents, and family-operated group home parents for the care of foster children in their homes is established in s. HFS 56.11(4), Adm. Code, and the Uniform Foster Care Rate Policy issued through DCFS Memo Series 2003-11. Due to the detrimental impact separating siblings can have on individual children, it is within the scope of the purpose of the exceptional rate for agencies to consider applying the exceptional rate to support the placement of siblings in out-of-home care.

Agencies can determine, based upon the needs of specific children, the amount of additional reimbursement needed to provide for and support the care and placement of siblings together in an out-of-home care placement. For example, the efforts of foster families to transport children to appointments, assist in therapy or treatment plans, and work with sibling groups to help them cope with the circumstances they have experienced individually and as a family unit are measurable efforts that could result in additional exceptional payments and can prevent children from going to more restrictive placements. Agencies have significant flexibility in determining an exceptional payment and can provide an exceptional payment without providing a supplemental payment to a foster parent.

### **Possible Exceptions To Joint Placement of Siblings**

The following exceptions are acceptable reasons for not placing siblings together:

- safety of the child (e.g., unresolved sexual abuse issues between siblings)
- child well-being (e.g., a child with significant special needs or a medically fragile child who requires a significant amount of time, or physical, mental or emotional resources from the foster or adoptive family), and
- family capacity (e.g., insufficient responsible adults in a home to supervise all the children or is insufficient space in the home to accommodate all the children).

These are examples and are not exhaustive of the reasons that may justify separating siblings. If the agency is unable to place all the siblings together in one home, it is recommended that efforts be made to place siblings together in subgroups based on the connections among siblings, the needs of individual children, and the best interests of the children.

Other reasons, such as sibling rivalry or a child who has assumed a parental role within the sibling group, are not valid justifications for separating siblings. As a general rule, agencies should work with out-of-home care providers to address issues like sibling rivalry and children who exhibit parentified behaviors within the home and within the sibling group over time as part of the therapeutic process.

The Department is also aware that cases exist where one sibling may have been placed in out-of-home care at an earlier point in time and placing a second sibling in that home could potentially interfere with the achievement of permanence for that child. In situations when it is not possible to place siblings together, it is recommended that connections be maintained by making efforts to encourage and support communication and interaction between the siblings.

### **Documentation**

If the agency identifies a reason for not placing all the siblings together, a written justification for the decision should be placed in the case file and in e-WiSACWIS and may be reviewed every six months during the permanency plan review or court permanence hearing. It is also recommended that the agency document in the case record what efforts are being made to maintain contacts between siblings who are not or cannot be placed together.

To assist agency and tribal staff in identifying and connecting siblings there is a PEP Report entitled

*Siblings in Placement Summary*, which identifies siblings in out-of-home placement who share either parents or guardians. The report, located on eWiSACWIS under the title eReports, shows how many siblings are in placement and how many siblings are placed with a sibling. The report identifies siblings based on a shared parent or shared guardian. As a result, a child could show up in more than one sibling group. A closer review of the *Siblings in Placement* detail report or the child's case file may be needed to determine the exact relationship. The report is updated monthly on the last day of the previous calendar month. This report will not include cases of siblings where the older child has been adopted prior to the younger sibling being born and entering out-of-home care.

eWiSACWIS cannot search child to child; it can only search parent to child or guardian to child. Currently sibling information is located on the Permanency Plan window, under the Placement Tab. It contains the question, "Are all siblings in OHC placed together?" In the same window there is a narration box under the question, "Is the current placement safe and appropriate?" The narration box could be used to document why siblings are not placed together or only placed together in part. The Department is requesting changes to that window to better identify its use for sibling information.

### **Indian Child Welfare Requirements**

The policy favoring placement of siblings together does not override the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). Requirements that a child who is a member of or eligible to be a member of a federally recognized Indian tribe must be placed under ICWA preferences with a relative, a tribal home, another Indian home, or a home approved by the tribe must be followed. If a family has Indian children and non-Indian children, then agencies should make every effort to place all the children in a home that meets ICWA placement standards.

### **Additional Resources**

For more information and resources about interactions between siblings in out-of-home care, training resources, use of respite care to enhance the understanding of issues regarding siblings in out-of-home care, and best practices regarding sibling placement, visit the National Resource Center for Family Centered-Practice and Permanency Planning web site at

[http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info\\_services/family-centered-practice.html](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/family-centered-practice.html)

To access information about Wisconsin's Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) and the Program Enhancement Plan (PEP), please visit the CFSR web site at <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/cfsr>

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