

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

To:      Area Administrators/Human Services Area Coordinators  
         Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare  
         DCFS Bureau Directors  
         County Departments of Community Programs Directors  
         County Departments of Developmental Disabilities Service Directors  
         County Departments of Human Services Directors  
         County Departments of Human Services Supervisors  
         County Departments of Social Services Directors  
         County Departments of Social Services Supervisors  
         Group Foster Home Licensees  
         Child Placing Agency Licensees  
         Licensing Chiefs/Licensing Supervisors  
         Tribal Chairpersons/Human Services Facilitators

From: Burnie Bridge  
         Administrator



Re:      Summary of Service and Support Needs of Foster Parents

This memo includes a report about the service and support needs of foster parents, a product developed by the Out-of-Home Care Committee to address Action Step K. in the Program Enhancement Plan, Wisconsin's response to the federal Child and Family Services Review. The Out-of-Home Care Committee was created out of the Program Enhancement Plan process to address a range of items related to out-of-home care including permanency planning, services for foster families, placement stability and re-entry, involving non-custodial parents and relatives, and other issues.

In order to address this issue, the Out-of-Home Care Committee was assigned to identify the service and support needs of foster parents, develop a profile of identified needs and gaps in services, and make recommendations for responding to those needs. To accomplish these tasks, the committee used existing sources of information from foster parents and also held regional focus groups with foster parents, child placing agencies, contracted service providers, and county foster care coordinators. The final document outlining service and support needs of foster parents and recommendations to address those needs is attached to this memo. The suggestions listed under each concern are recommendations made by foster parents, staff who work with foster families, and members of the Out-of-Home Care Committee for consideration by local agencies, state agencies, and other groups or agencies who work with foster care.

This document will be used to inform future policies developed by the Division of Children and Family Services. Please review the attached "Summary of Service and Support Needs of Foster Parents" document, discuss the needs of foster parents within your agency, and consider ways the information contained in this document can be used to support foster parents in your agency.

To access information about the Program Enhancement Plan, please visit the web site for the PEP at <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/cfsr>

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MEMO WEB SITE: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/cwportal/policy>

Attachments: Summary of Service and Support Needs of Foster Parents

**Summary of Service and Support Needs of Foster Parents**  
**Services to Foster Families Workgroup**  
**Out-of-Home Care Committee**  
**Child and Family Services Review Program Enhancement Plan**  
**March 2006**

This document was developed by the Out-of-Home Care Committee as outlined in the Program Enhancement Plan, Wisconsin's response to the federal Child and Family Services Review, Action Step K. "Increase the effectiveness of support for foster parents by improving their access to information, training, and resources."

The following information outlines the service and support needs of foster parents compiled from survey results, publications, and focus groups with foster parents and county, private and tribal agency staff who work with foster families across the state. This is not an exhaustive list of service and support needs of foster families in Wisconsin; foster families in different regions of the state may have varying access to the items included in this document or may have needs not included here.

The suggestions listed under each concern are recommendations made by foster parents, staff who work with foster families, and members of the Out-of-Home Care Committee for consideration by local agencies, state agencies, and other groups or agencies who work with foster care. Please read through this summary, consult with foster parents in your agency or region, and consider how your agency can implement any of these items to increase support to foster parents in your area.

**I. Key areas that foster parents or social workers identified as strengths in the child welfare system**

**a. Training**

- Foster parents value training that includes pre-service, ongoing, and special needs or specialized topics. Agencies report benefits from various training curriculums, both PACE (Partners in Alternative Care Education) and other curriculums.
- In addition, information about foster parent's and the agency's legal responsibilities for children were reported to be very helpful and necessary to do their job.
- One agency reported seeing a large impact on their foster care system as pre-service training is implemented, specifically regarding enhanced communication between the foster parents and the agency.
- Foster parents reported that there is a value in having workers take PACE foster parent training in classes with foster families.

### **b. Support**

- Foster parents reported that regularly scheduled foster parent support meetings, mentoring components, listening sessions and more contact by the agency (phone calls and home visits) are critical to them.

### **c. Communication**

- Some foster parents said that they feel listened to by agencies when stating they cannot take a placement, are having trouble with a child placed in their home, or identify their comfort level working with birth parents.
- Foster parents reported feeling included when there is frequent communication with the social worker particularly home visits, they attend court hearings, are allowed to participate in therapy sessions, etc.

## **II. Key areas that foster parents identified as needing improvement regarding the child welfare system**

### **a. Training**

1. *Issue:* Foster parents want to be considered a valuable and respected part of the treatment team.

For example, foster parents and agencies said that sometimes training a foster parent receives is not consistent with agency practice. Training that teaches foster parents that they are part of the team may not be consistent with agency practice which doesn't include foster parents in meetings about the child in their care.

#### Recommendations:

- Educate social workers and case managers about the roles, responsibilities, challenges, and dynamics of being a foster parent.
  - Develop a video that captures the experience of being a foster parent.
  - Identify teaming as a core competency.
  - Have agencies develop clear policies about how they work or interact with foster parents, such as primary care teams, coordinated services teams, etc. and share copies of those policies with foster parents.
  - Make a recommendation to the Training Council that pre-service for workers include a component of working or meeting with foster parents.
  - Include foster parents in the planning and delivery of training about foster care for child welfare workers.
  - Have social workers attend foster parent orientation meetings or some component of foster parent pre-service training.
  - Ask foster parents what they need in order to feel like they are a part of the treatment team.
2. *Issue:* Agency staff and foster parents support more joint training for foster parents and agency workers.

#### Recommendations:

- Request more joint trainings for foster parents and social workers offered by the Training Partnerships. *Note:* The Training Partnerships are in the process of piloting and offering combined trainings with agency staff and foster parents.
  - Encourage agencies to co-train foster parents and agency staff.
  - Create more consistency among counties and among the Training Partnerships so that training offered to a foster parent in one county is also available to a foster parent in another county.
3. *Issue:* Foster parents reported that they could benefit from training about effectively working through conflict, advocating for a foster child, and partnering or working with the agency.
- Recommendations:*
- Agencies should work with social workers and foster parents to encourage and support foster parent inclusion in team meetings and receipt of information about a child's case.
  - The expectations and rights of foster parents should be clearly articulated.

**b. Support**

1. *Issue:* Foster parents reported wanting assistance from the agency with preventative measures to deal with case challenges before crises arise, including changes or updates in the visitation plan, assistance with escalating behavioral issues with the child, as well as major case events that could affect the child and birth family.
- Recommendations:*
- Develop crisis response plans.
  - Focus service provision on foster parents through frequent and consistent communication, information, and contact.
  - Utilize primary care teams.
  - Encourage foster parents to contact one another or consider use of an outside agency to help provide supportive services to foster parents.
  - Provide individualized foster parent training or education.
  - Provide individualized supportive services for foster children and foster families.
2. *Issue:* Foster parents said they want agencies to show their appreciation for the work that they do.
- Recommendations:*
- Have the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center maintain information about recognition ideas and resources.
  - Develop ongoing strategies for recognition and appreciation of foster parents.
3. *Issue:* Foster parents reported a desire to be able to connect with other foster families, to have mentors, and to share experiences.
- Recommendations:*
- Connect foster parents to one another - give foster parents information about the Wisconsin Association of Foster and Adoptive Parents Association (WFAPA) and any local associations.

- Every agency should distribute a list of the licensed foster parents in their agency to foster parents on a regular basis.
  - Include information about foster parent associations (local, statewide and national) in the foster parent handbook.
  - Encourage agencies to identify foster parent ambassadors or recruiters who have 1) varied experience, 2) a positive outlook about foster care (and adoption), and 3) knowledge about the child welfare system and agency and community services.
  - Develop resources to assist agencies in creating foster parent mentors and ambassadors.
4. *Issue:* Both agencies and foster parents state that some foster parents who provide concurrent care or concurrent planning sometimes have difficulty when case plans change. Some foster parents reported feeling pressure to adopt children in their home.
- Recommendations:*
- Educate foster parents and agency staff about the reasons for reunification and expectations in the child welfare system and varying family or cultural expectations.
5. *Issue:* Agencies and foster parents suggested that foster parents may need assistance working through grief and loss issues.
- Recommendations:*
- Allow foster parents access to agency Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services.
  - Provide training for foster parents about grief and loss, including grief and loss issues for foster families as well as foster children.
6. *Issue:* Foster parents and agencies report difficulties when there are allegations of child abuse or neglect made against a foster home. This includes how to share information, support of the foster home by agency staff, complete the investigation process, and provide support services.
- Recommendations:*
- Issue the model policy to work with foster parents when there are allegations of child maltreatment.
  - Include local agency policy and model statewide policy regarding allegations of child maltreatment against foster parents in the foster parent handbook.

**c. Communication/ Collaboration**

1. *Issue:* Foster parents report they have felt left out of the circle of communication due to issues such as: worker scheduling conflicts, not agreeing with the worker on case decisions, lack of follow-up case plan information.
- Recommendations:*
- Clarify for workers what information can be shared with foster parents, i.e. permanency plans, court documents, etc.
2. *Issue:* Foster parents expressed the desire for more regular updates on case changes and progress from the social worker. In addition, some foster parents experience frustration with the court process and not understanding what is happening with a case.

Recommendations:

- Include information about court proceedings, requirements, and processes in the foster parent handbook.
3. Issue: Agencies and foster parents said that some foster parents do not clearly understand their roles and abilities, such as permission for the foster child to get a haircut or receive medical care.

Recommendations:

- Develop a description of the roles and responsibilities of a foster parent or a job description
  - Articulate the expectations and rights of foster parents.
4. Issue: Some foster parents reported that workers in the agency have questioned their motivation, suggesting that they provide foster care for monetary purposes when they request an increase in reimbursement. Foster parents suggested that they may be reluctant to discuss increases to the reimbursement rate for a foster child and may need encouragement from workers to discuss increases when they are appropriate and necessary.

Recommendations:

- Provide foster parents with a copy of the completed supplemental and exceptions Uniform Foster Care Rate Setting Form and how to appeal the rate.
5. Issue: Foster parents stated that foster parents across the state often do not know about grievance procedures or how to address concerns with an agency.

Recommendations:

- Include local agency grievance procedures in the foster parent handbook.
  - Recommend that Child Placing Agencies (CPAs) develop grievance procedures to communicate to their foster parents.
6. Issue: Foster parents have expressed not understanding the difference in federal, state, or local requirements, including the court system, and their ability to appeal or challenge a requirement or decision.

Recommendation:

- Include information about court proceedings requirements, and processes in the foster parent handbook.

**d. Resources/Information**

1. Issue: Agencies stated that respite services are misunderstood or lacking – including access to appropriate respite care providers, a foster parent’s understanding of the amount of respite they can use, and how to access respite services.

Recommendations:

- Survey foster parents about their use of respite, including any state or local barriers they experience to the use of respite.
- Work to normalize the use of respite services.

There were additional items mentioned in the course of surveys and discussions with foster parents and agency staff are either broad, statewide issues that include other systems, (i.e., **lack of dental and mental health services**) or are very specific and require individual attention from

a worker or supervisor (i.e., foster parents feeling **a lack of responsiveness** from their worker or agency). Other reported needs that varied in scope included a **lack of resources and reimbursement** for foster parents, **feeling retaliated against** by the agency for advocating for children or questioning agency practice, and a **lack of health insurance**.

Various grassroots efforts are being done to address some specific needs, including the Tri-County Dental Association in the Northeastern Region of the state and the managed health care initiative with foster children in Milwaukee, which will hopefully provide successful examples of how to address some of the systemic needs for children and foster families.

As the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center develops its information and web site, staff will become more knowledgeable about what resources and innovative programs are going on across the state. For more information about the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center, visit their web site at <http://www.wifostercareandadoption.org/> or call 1-800-762-8063.

This information contained in this document will be also used to inform additional tasks outlined in the Program Enhancement Plan such as the development of a foster parent handbook (K.5.), foster parent training expectations (K.4.), and emergency response plans for children in out-of-home care (C.4.). To learn more about the Program Enhancement Plan and Wisconsin's Child and Family Services Review, please visit the Division of Children and Family Services web site at <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/cfsr>



## Sources

“Feedback and Recommendations Report.” First Choice for Children - Lutheran Social Services. October 2004.

Information included in this report was gathered during a focus group session comprised of 12 currently or previously licensed foster homes in the Milwaukee area. Questions were posed in an open-ended manner and asked about foster parents feeling listened to, formal listening sessions, feeling supported or a lack of support, and general foster parent needs.

Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center Stakeholder Meetings. May 2004 and July 2004.

During the initial development stages of the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center, the Division of Children and Family Services held focus groups with a wide variety of stakeholders in the foster care and adoption systems. Participants were asked open-ended questions to identify and discuss the unmet needs of foster parents, adoptive parents, and foster care coordinators. Included in the stakeholder meetings were foster parents, adoptive parents, foster care coordinators, county staff, private child-placing agencies, tribal staff, state staff, the UW Training Partnerships, and advocacy agencies from across the state.

“Foster Parent Communication Satisfaction.” Rock County Department of Human Services. August 2004.

This survey was distributed to 103 foster parents in Rock County in August of 2004. Results were based upon 47 responses, a 46 percent return. Questions were asked in a yes-no format with space for written comments and included topics such as communication, inclusion as a team member, legal responsibilities, ability to decline placements, agency newsletter, responsiveness of the agency, training, foster care reimbursement rates, advisory committee participation, and working with birth parents.

Fox Valley Foster Care Coordinators Meeting. March 2005.

The Fox Valley Foster Care Coordinators group represents counties and private agencies in the northeastern region of Wisconsin and meets monthly to discuss issues related to their role as foster care coordinators, develop training for foster parents in their region, share information, and discuss concerns specific to their region. This information in draft form was presented and discussed at their meeting on March 23, 2005.

North Central Foster Care Coordinators Meeting. March 2005.

The North Central Foster Care Coordinators group represents counties in the north-central region of Wisconsin and meets monthly to discuss issues related to their role as foster care coordinators, develop training for foster parents in their region, share information, and discuss concerns specific to their region. This information in draft form was presented and discussed at their meeting on March 17, 2005.

“Supporting Foster Families as Team Members Serving Children and Their Families.” Foster Parent Advisory Group Report. Division of Children and Family Services. September 1997.

In 1996, a group of foster parents were selected to assist the Division of Children and Family Services in identifying the supports foster families needed to better children and families in out-of-home care. The report developed by this group, the Foster Parent Advisory Group, outlines four major categories of supports: service supports, fiscal and programmatic supports, education/training supports, and foster care promotional support. This publication DCF-P-PFS4021 “Supporting Foster Families” can be accessed on the Internet at: <https://def.wisconsin.gov/publications>.

Southeastern Wisconsin Foster Care Coordinators Meeting. March 2005

The southeastern regional foster care coordinators group represents counties and private agencies in the southeastern region of Wisconsin and meets quarterly to discuss issues related to their role as foster care coordinators, to share information, and to discuss concerns specific to their region. This information in draft form was presented and discussed at their meeting on March 15, 2005.

Southern Wisconsin Foster Care Coordinators Meeting. February 2005.

The southern regional foster care coordinators group represents counties in the southern region of Wisconsin and meets bi-monthly to discuss issues related to their role as foster care coordinators, to share information, and to discuss concerns specific to their region. This information in draft form was presented and discussed at their meeting on February 16, 2005.

Wisconsin Association of Child Foster Care Coordinators Meeting. March 2005.

An early draft version of this summary was presented for discussion at the Wisconsin Association of Child Foster Care Coordinators (WACFCC) statewide meeting on March 1, 2005. This statewide association meets quarterly to discuss issues related to the role of foster care coordinators in both public and private agencies and hosts an annual conference.

Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (WFAPA) biannual conference. April 2005.

A draft was shared at the WFAPA spring conference on April 1, 2005. Attendees were presented with a draft of the document and, since there wasn't much time to discuss the information, were provided with an email and phone number to submit comments. For more information about WFAPA, visit their web site at <http://www.wfapa.org>