



Putting Families First Playbook

County Boards

County board members are elected officials who have a strong vested interest in their community and constituents. They may not initially be familiar with child welfare (either child protective services (CPS) or youth justice), human services policy or the impacts of trauma. It is important to remember that these individuals have the best interest of their communities in mind and may be curious or have their own assumptions about how to best keep children and communities safe. County board members are serving a specific role and must respond to their constituents' concerns and manage complicated budgets. It will likely be helpful to focus on local impacts of this approach, instead of broad philosophical values related to child welfare.

Key Talking Points

- Board members may not understand that separating a child from their home causes harm, no matter why that intervention needed to occur. Having this understanding may help some members recognize the benefits of serving children safely in their homes as often as resources will allow. See the Research Section of this document for key data points to highlight.
- County agencies may also benefit from providing information about how healthy caregivers lead to safe children, youth and families. It is important to make the connection between the wellbeing of parents and how that is a benefit to their children and youth. · Consider budget impacts, so that board members can assess the local impact of this approach. (See [Preventing Removals and Investing in Prevention](#) for more on out-of-home placement costs.)
- While decision-making about child safety is not impacted by funding, when there are more resources available to serve children in home, children are less likely to experience disrupted education and living arrangements or other negative outcomes.
 - ◇ By allocating resources to serve children in their current homes, agencies are reducing potential harm to the child while also reducing costs associated with other expensive interventions down the line.
 - ◇ Consider highlighting the cost-benefit analysis data found in the Research Section that highlights the costs of upstream investment vs. out-of-home care costs.

“Putting Families First has provided a driving force to prevent children from entering foster care. The resources the county board redirected to support this work have had an immense impact on out-of-home placements at the benefit of both families and the community. Child welfare staff are able to expand their ability to stabilize families and increase the number of children who can remain safely at home.”

- Scott Maier, Racine County Board Supervisor





- It is also important to discuss how county board policy choices can have generational positive impacts on families. County boards that support prevention are helping to end cycles of abuse, neglect, poverty and delinquency by supporting families to learn healthy skills.
 - ◊ Be prepared to justify why this approach directly benefits the residents of the community. Learn about local leaders and select an approach that makes sense with their individual preferences and the community's needs.

Food for thought: It may be helpful to support county board members in identifying how they would want the system to respond if one of their own children or family members required support. Feedback from these discussions generally supports ensuring safety with current caregivers (as that is least disruptive to the child) or having the child with someone they already know (family or like-kin) when that is not possible.

What Can County Boards Expect Around Putting Families First?

Child welfare agencies will continue to assess safety in response to abuse and neglect allegations and continue working with youth in the youth justice system when necessary, as required by state law. County staff and local communities will retain all decision-making authority over their systems and case decisions. Local leaders will continue to determine how to utilize their resources in their communities to meet their specific needs.

County board members may notice the following as child welfare agencies support Putting Families First:

- Increased efforts to educate community members about how they can support families.

- Requests for county board members to share their expertise on how the community can come together to support their most vulnerable residents.
- Requests for support for initiatives that support family preservation.
- A reduction in costs associated with expensive out-of-home care placements, congregate care settings or out-of-state service needs allowing for reinvestment in front-end in-home efforts.
- Reports of positive experiences from constituents, families and the workforce.
- Initial apprehension around new approaches (as people who do not understand this approach express their concerns).
- Opportunities to share their expertise as board members about why working in this way can be life-changing for local community members.

Some board members may worry this approach may not hold parents accountable for past behavior. That thinking is consistent with historical CPS practices and usually comes from a place of wanting to ensure child safety. Explain that removals will still occur if necessary for child safety. Then, remind county board members that in-home CPS interventions are intensive services and likely feel invasive for families. While agency response will sometimes look different (as child welfare agencies now have more resources and tools to prevent unnecessary family separation), it will also be more likely to strengthen families and reduce avoidable trauma for children in the community. Similarly, youth justice responses will focus on diverting youth who do not need court system involvement while prioritizing community-based interventions for those who require services and reserving secure placements to only when needed for public safety. Putting Families First allows for **productive** accountability.

Have the Hard Conversation

In some communities, there may be recent tragic stories locally or on the news about families who were not successful in-home. Talk about how the services and supports agencies put in place can help keep more children and families safe together.

How Can County Boards Support Putting Families First?

Every community has unique strengths and needs, and accordingly, each community knows best how to address and respond to their own members. County boards can support the work of Putting Families First by:

- Assessing current community resource strengths and needs by connecting with local leaders about how to keep families safely together.
- Communicating with county human services department leaders about any concerns, questions or ideas on how to Put Families First.

- Recommending and funding ways to improvements and investments in local services to ensure more children can be served in their communities and homes.
- Advocating for increased in-home funding and supports at the state level through local state representatives and organizations such as the Wisconsin County Board Association.
- Listening to individuals with lived experience in the YJ or CPS system in the community to learn more about their experience and what barriers they face when it comes to community resources.



On January 1, 2018, there were 350 children in Racine County placed in out-of-home care. This was a historically high, alarming and unsustainable number. It was then that Racine County launched its Safety Support Program with the Racine County Board-approved funding. In an effort to reduce these out-of-home placements, the Safety Support Program began using what are now known as Targeted Safety Support Funds to intensively support families in-home. With a concentrated service approach, Racine County's child welfare professionals were able to ensure child safety while keeping families together.

*Racine County soon saw incredible results. On October 1, 2022 Racine County achieved an all-time low of **110 children** placed out-of-home. More and more families were being supported in-home. To strengthen these efforts, Racine County directed additional resources and funding to more effectively identify, locate and support relative placements. This has resulted in fewer children entering foster care. In fact, in 2022, **more than half of all out-of-home placements were with relatives.***

The success in establishing the Safety Support Program and redirecting funding to support families and achieve these outcomes would not have been possible without the support of the Racine County Board. County board members took the initiative to understand the growth in out-of-home placements and took a brave approach in addressing the situation.

Additional Resources

- [Case Flow: Access](#) – Wisconsin's child welfare system is divided into three stages; this infographic details how a case moves through the access stage of the system.
- [Case Flow: Initial Assessment](#) – Wisconsin's child welfare system is divided into three stages; this infographic details how a case moves through the initial assessment stage of the system.

