



Putting Families First Playbook

Law Enforcement

Law enforcement and child welfare agencies often work hand-in-hand on the most challenging situations to ensure child, youth and community safety. While these systems collaborate, their purposes are different. Law enforcement determines whether or not a crime has been committed, whereas the main focus of child welfare agencies is the safety of children and also determining if maltreatment occurred. Since both agencies use a different burden of proof to make these decisions, this can result in frustration between the agencies.

Law enforcement professionals often ask about accountability and monitoring for families involved in child welfare. Discussing some key areas such as community beliefs around the role of child protective services and child welfare professional training around safety may be beneficial to build shared understanding.

Key Talking Points

- Child welfare professionals use a safety decision-making model to identify danger threats in families. Child welfare professionals develop plans that are least intrusive.
- Sometimes the circumstances that are viewed as 'unsafe' by the general public do not rise to the level necessary to warrant CPS intervention.
- All child welfare professionals are required by law to take specific training, including training related to making safety decisions.
 - ◇ Safety decision making training teaches child welfare professionals how to identify danger and how to develop plans with families when a child is determined to be unsafe.
 - ◇ As part of the work of Putting Families First, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) continues to make improvements to these and other trainings.

"Law enforcement will always put the safety of our children, families and communities first. One way to keep communities safe is by investing in front-end prevention. Putting Families First makes this investment and enables law enforcement to partner with our human service colleagues to provide a safe and supportive environment where families can achieve long-term health and success."

Marathon County Sheriff Chad Billeb





Food for thought: Sometimes the circumstances that are viewed as 'unsafe' by the general public do not rise to the level necessary to warrant CPS intervention.

Make it personal: It can be helpful to give common examples from your community of situations that are referred to child welfare but do not warrant intervention.

What Can Law Enforcement Expect Around Putting Families First?

Law enforcement should continue to refer cases to local child welfare agencies, child protective services and youth justice as they have in the past. When a child is determined to be unsafe, child welfare professionals will determine the least intrusive method possible to keep the child safe, starting with an in-home safety plan.

Be prepared to share with law enforcement, that in-home safety plans put into place for children may look different from historically based on deliberate work to center families in the planning process.

- Law enforcement may notice child welfare professionals spending more time developing in-home safety plans with families when they respond to a report of alleged maltreatment.
 - ◇ When a dangerous condition is identified and there is a need for a plan to shield the child from those conditions, the child welfare professional is required by policy to put a plan into place before leaving the family's home.
 - ◇ Law enforcement agencies may want to discuss with child welfare professionals ahead of time what is needed from them once law enforcement meets their requirements (i.e. does the officer need to stay with the child welfare professional the whole time they are developing the plan).
 - ◇ County agencies are also implementing the Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument to better understand the risk, needs and strengths of youth referred through the youth justice system. This can help ensure that interventions are both appropriate for the level of risk and responsive to the specific needs of the youth, which increases community safety.



The relationships between agencies and their local partners are critical to the success of Putting Families First. These relationships support and strengthen the work in invaluable ways.

Marathon County works closely with the Marathon County Sheriff's Office to keep children safe and connect families with needed resources and services. The Sheriff's Office is a strong partner in this work and goes about it with a trauma-informed approach. The Sheriff's Office was even an early adopter of programs like the Crisis Response Team, which attends to situations involving mental health struggles, drug misuse and addiction. They understand there is a more empathetic and less punitive way of supporting those who experience these kinds of challenges.

Marathon County child welfare professionals often feel like they are on "one team" with their law enforcement partners when responding to complex drug situations and other affairs. When there is a divergence between the child welfare and law enforcement professionals in thinking about and addressing certain cases, they talk through them as partners. They have these conversations with the shared understanding that children do best when they are with their families and that the justice system is an important piece in getting to that outcome.

The Sheriff's Office and other law enforcement partners in Marathon County have been explicit in their support of Marathon County's child welfare professionals, which means the world to those doing the work of Putting Families First every day.

How Can Law Enforcement Support Putting Families First?

Continue or establish partnerships. Build or establish joint responses on certain types of child welfare cases or schedule regular meetings together as part of a Multi-Disciplinary Team so that a system is already in place for challenge situation.

Establish open dialogue between child welfare professionals and law enforcement officers. Child welfare agencies and law enforcement are encouraged to discuss challenges and help one another understand the reasons why decisions are made. Both professions want children to be safe and loved members of their communities, but that may look different based on the requirements of their roles.

Be an advocate! Law enforcement officers are often trusted local officials and can be incredible advocates for the need for upfront services to keep children in-home. Law enforcement can help others understand the importance of children remaining with those and surrounded by those who care about them.

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.
- [Wisconsin's Plan for Assessment and Case Planning in Youth Justice Statewide](#) – a DCF resource.

