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Governor signs bill extending foster care placement to age 21 for education completion

(MADISON) – Today Governor Scott Walker signed SB 451 into law, which allows a youth to voluntarily remain in out-of-home care until the age of 21. The new law, 2013 Wisconsin Act 334, will allow youth with an Individualized Learning Program (IEP) who are attending school full time to voluntarily remain in out-of-home care until they obtain their high school diploma or its equivalent. Previously, foster children aged out of the child welfare system at age 18 or 19, often ill-prepared to function independently and successfully in the adult world.

“Youth who age out of the child welfare system are at a higher risk for homelessness, incarceration, teen pregnancy, and unemployment,” said Governor Walker. “Extending out-of-home care placements will provide needed assistance to help these young adults successfully transition from care to independence.”

In Wisconsin, approximately 450 youth age out of the child welfare system each year. Over 43% of them have an IEP due to a learning disability and have not graduated high school, which increases their vulnerability to poor outcomes. Key obstacles include a lack of stable housing, lack of a high school diploma, financial and educational barriers to post-secondary education, and little or no job skills. Research has shown that by age 19, over half of former or current female foster youth had been pregnant at least once. By 24 years of age, 59% of male former foster care youth had been convicted of a crime, compared to 10% of males of similar age in the general population.

“Transitioning to independent living can be a challenge for many young adults, whether they grew up in a traditional home or out-of-home care. This transition is even more difficult without a high school diploma,” said Department of Children and Families Secretary Eloise Anderson. “Thanks to the authors of SB 451, Senator Moulton and Representative Loudenberg, this new law will help foster youth overcome these obstacles and successfully transition to productive, stable, and fulfilling adult lives.”

Wisconsin now joins the ranks of 18 states that extend foster care to 21 for a sub-population of vulnerable youth. There are 18 additional states, including Illinois, Minnesota, Michigan and Indiana, which currently extend foster care to 21 for all youth.

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