



Putting Families First in the Redesign of Wisconsin's Child Welfare System

Making critical investments in Wisconsin's child welfare system to support more families in-home and bolster family-focused, collaborative programs.

Keeping Families Together

Keeping families together and reducing the use of out-of-home care is critical for strengthening the underlying fabric of Wisconsin's communities. The budget is providing historic investments to support families who are involved with the child welfare system to reduce trauma, maintain safety, and ensure kids stay connected with families. This includes investing **\$35 million** over the biennium to support an intensive, evidence-based parenting skills program designed to safely prevent children from entering out-of-home care or to reunify them with family as quickly as possible. Additionally, the budget includes \$5 million across the biennium to expand home visiting services to additional counties and tribes and an annual increase of \$20 million to increase DCF's domestic abuse services grants and re-establish the Living Independently through Financial Empowerment (LIFE) program.



Strengthening Support for Kinship Caregivers

Relatives or family friends are the preferred resource for children who must be removed from their home because it helps maintain the children's connections with their families, increases stability, and minimizes the trauma of family separation. The budget strengthens supports for kinship caregivers by investing **\$34 million** across the biennium to increase age-based rates by 5 percent and expand eligibility for the clothing exceptional rate and sibling exceptional rate. It also recommends **\$16 million** in funding for additional, flexible financial support to kinship caregivers (known at DCF as *KinFlex*) and for family search services for child welfare agencies in search of prospective kinship caregivers. Lastly, the budget calls for an expansion of the definition of relation to allow for family friends to qualify for kinship care supports.

Supporting Children and Families in Crisis

Serving children in their communities is an agency-wide priority. Recruiting and retaining foster care and relative caregivers is critical to keeping kids connected to families. The budget increases the foster care age-based rates by 5 percent. This increase also provides for foster care level 1 caregivers to receive these age-based rates, as well as the ability to qualify for sibling exceptional payments and one-time clothing allowances. In addition, an annual investment of **\$75,000** will support the creation of a grant program to allow siblings in out-of-home care critical opportunities to be reunited, such as at summer camps. When children cannot remain in family settings, or families aren't able to meet the needs of their children with available community services, it is vital that they receive high quality, timely, treatment-based services. To support this, the budget is investing **\$15 million** to strengthen the continuum of care in the Milwaukee child welfare system to ensure that children who have the highest level of need are able to be stabilized and served effectively in their home state, in qualified treatment programs, and have the tools and supports to transition successfully into family living arrangements.

