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Governor Evers and DCF Present Outstanding Foster and Adoptive Family Awards

MADISON — Governor Tony Evers and Department of Children and Families (DCF) Secretary-designee Jeff Pertl honored 10 adoptive, guardianship, foster and relative caregiver families today by presenting them with the 2024 Governor’s Outstanding Foster and Adoptive Family Award.

“There is a shared thread that runs through each of your stories, and it’s why you are here today. You care deeply for kids and their families. You stepped up and built connections with birth parents, fostered shared parenting, provided a welcoming space for kids with additional needs, and kept sibling connections intact. You also care about our kids’ sense of belonging and connection — to you and the folks in their lives, their communities, and their cultures,” said Gov. Evers. “The work you do is irreplaceable. So, I want to again offer my sincere thanks on behalf of our state for the work you do to support kids and their families.”

Nominations for the awards were received from child welfare professionals, representatives from community organizations, and others from across the state who wanted to recognize those who have been incredible partners to Wisconsin’s children and families. The recipients were chosen based on their experiences supporting shared parenting, cultural and community connections and the well-being of the children in their care.

“Each year, these awards are a wonderful opportunity to for families to share their stories and for us to recognize their journey,” said DCF Secretary-designee Jeff Pertl. “As a former foster parent and dad to two boys who were adopted, I know firsthand many of the joys and challenges these families experience, and I am immensely grateful for all they do for children.”

Of the dozens of nominations received, 10 families were selected to receive an award:

James and Elizabeth Anderson of Blanchardville were recognized for their exceptional care for children diagnosed with health issues prior to birth. Their healthcare background, combined with their compassionate and knowledgeable approach has helped create a loving and supportive family environment to help their child navigate their road to recovery.

Natasha Becker and Shiquille Ward of Appleton were honored for their constant support and care for multiple children. They focus on assisting family reunification through building strong bonds with the biological families. They are a full-time foster home that goes above and beyond to keep children safe and connected to their families. Their close involvement with birth families

has facilitated smooth reunifications, while ensuring children are well-cared-for while in their home.

Kara and Joseph Bennier of Milwaukee were recognized for their extraordinary methods of supporting families. They have shown constant dedication to the children in their care by going above and beyond to provide a supportive, safe environment. They strive to maintain sibling bonds while handling complex situations with empathy. They serve as a crucial support for other foster families by sharing their knowledge and experiences.

Chelsie and Jon Heesch of Sparta were recognized for their dedication to supporting sibling groups in foster care. They provide a stable and loving environment while working to preserve their children's cultural ties by encouraging continued learning and participation in their communities.

Michelle and Mike Klintworth of New Richmond were recognized for welcoming a sibling group into their family and home. The Klintworth's focused on the children settling into their new environment and built a relationship with them that centered on patience and compassion. They encouraged connection with birth parents, relatives, siblings, and others to provide stability and a sense of normalcy for the children in their care.

Kim and Brian LaLuzerne of Hobart were recognized for their commitment to fostering strong sibling and family connections within their foster home. As foster parents, they are dedicated to providing stability, supporting their children's academic achievements and encouraging community involvement through activities like local sports. The couple consistently seeks guidance from their children to understand and support their interests and overall wellbeing.

Brody and Jamie Larson of New Richmond were honored for their compassionate approach and positive impact to foster care within their local community. They initially welcomed a sibling pair, demonstrating an unwavering commitment to keeping families together and supporting crucial sibling connections. They prioritize understanding the impacts of intergenerational trauma and have worked to address language barriers with the families with whom they are partnering. Their support has extended beyond the children in their care to the children's families, offering advocacy and crucial, concrete support so the families can reunify.

Lily Lincoln of Tomah was recognized for her dedication to the children and families of the Ho-Chunk Nation. She has been a crucial support to the community for over 10 years, forging meaningful, lasting bonds with each child in her care. She preserves and encourages strong her children's cultural and community connections and deeply understands the importance of supporting children as they heal from past trauma. She shares the children's updates and experiences with their families so they can remain engaged and present in their child's life.

Melissa and Keith Mortan of Sparta were honored for their unique combination of lived experience and commitment to reunifying children with their families. They embody what it means to "Put Families First," and have dedicated themselves to the safety and well-being of not only the children in their care, but also the children's families. By offering a supportive space for conversations about the challenges of parenting, healing, and recovery, they act as a crucial partner to parents and caregivers as well as children. Their goal is to ensure that children are

reunified with their families and feel safe, supported, and loved in their homes. The Mortans often continue to support parents even after the children have returned home, demonstrating a lasting commitment to the family's success and well-being.

Stephanie and Dustin Witzigmann of Watertown were honored for their exceptional commitment to foster care and family preservation through partnership with the biological families. They encourage family involvement by including the family in the decision-making process at the start of any placement. Over the past six years, they have supported countless children and continue to serve as mentors for newly-licensed foster families.

Since 2018, DCF has been working to transition the child welfare system to serve more children and families in-home with supportive services. When this is not possible, adoptive, guardianship, foster and relative caregivers are critical partners to these children, youth, and families across Wisconsin.

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