



August 19, 2022

Christa Jensen, Agency Liaison
Marathon County Citizen Review Panel
Marathon County Department of Social Services
400 East Thomas Street
Wausau, WI 54403

Dear Ms. Jensen:

Thank you for your timely submission of the Marathon County Citizen Review Panel's report in compliance with the Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). This letter fulfills the citizen review panel annual report response requirements set forth in CAPTA.

The Citizen Review Panel submitted two recommendations to improve child protection services at the state level. A brief summarized statement of each recommendation and the Department of Children and Families (DCF) Division of Safety and Permanence (DSP) response follows:

- 1. We are aware of the significant need for services for children and families whose children have complex care needs. Often, these children end up in very high level (often out of state) placements. As we seek least restrictive placements, we recommend flexible alternatives for licensing of foster parents and kinship homes. The definition of kinship in support of family first is not the same definition wherein formal financial support can be offered to assist natural supports in maintaining these children.**

DCF appreciates the acknowledgement and recognition of support and alternatives for relatives as it directly aligns with DCF's [Putting Families First](#) initiative.

DCF supports a timely licensing process for all applicants, including relatives and like-kin. Over the past year, DCF has made numerous changes to the exception panel process. While licensing agencies have always been allowed to make exceptions to certain non-statutory licensing requirements for all applicants, they have been encouraged to exercise particular flexibility regarding any non-safety related exceptions for relatives and like-kin providers so that children can remain with their families whenever possible. Additionally, DCF has created a [frequently asked questions document](#) to assist agencies in knowing what information to include in exception requests submitted to the Department. This was created in an effort to render a more timely decision. Included in this document is the following language that is intended to offer additional support to relatives in the licensing process: *The DCF Exceptions Panel will give additional flexibility to non-safety related exception requests for relative and like-kin providers to support the larger department goal of keeping children with family. Licensing agencies should submit exception requests*

*as often as possible to support the licensing of relatives and like-kin providers. Licensing agencies should also grant “non-safety related waivers for relatives” whenever possible for any licensing requirements designated with an asterisk * in the Wisconsin Administrative Code DCF 56. Finally, DCF has strategic workstreams in process directly related to addressing barriers for relatives to receive kinship or become licensed foster parents.*

DCF has also heard from multiple stakeholders that the kinship care definition of “relative” for the purpose of receiving kinship care payments (s. 48.57) can create challenges in certain situations. While the definition is in statute and cannot be changed without legislative amendment, DCF is looking at what can be done within the parameters of state and federal law. DCF is committed to the continuing evaluation of our state’s relative definition for inequities and to explore ways to improve the application of and support to relatives and like-kin caregivers. For example, there were recent amendments to DCF 58 to increase access to long-term kinship programs for Tribes across Wisconsin. These amendments took effect on July 1, 2022.

Additionally, an increase in kinship care rates was included in the Governor’s 2021-2023 biennial budget. This increase raised the monthly rates for kinship care providers from \$254 per month to \$300 per month. While there is more to be done to ensure relatives have the support needed, this was an important step. Like-kin are often recognized by children and their families and an informal extension of family, thereby considering these relationships to be included in the family structure. DCF will continue to elevate this important philosophical orientation when evaluating and implementing policy and practice.

2. Continued funding and flexibility around programs like TSSF are important to continue. These funding sources aid in maintaining families together and have helped to maintain children upon being reunified.

Additionally, we advocate for the state to supply direct funding to counties for preventative programming, such as intensive in-home services. Often, these programs are extremely costly to get started and counties do not have the funds alone to get these programs started.

As part of DCF’s [Putting Families First](#) initiative and as aligned with DCF’s vision for children and families, we are prioritizing investments and changes in practice and program toward our state’s local CPS agencies being able to serve children within their family homes. These changes and investments are taking place in many areas of our work, including diversity, equity, and inclusion and the safety assessment and planning process.

DCF is proud to support the [Targeted Safety Support Funding \(TSSF\)](#) program. In 2022, 65 county child welfare agencies and five federally recognized tribes applied and were awarded TSSF funds. DCF recognizes the value in the funds being flexible on a local level which includes the ability to receive reimbursement

on contracting with formal providers. DCF is committed to finding ways that TSSF funding can be preserved and expanded.

The 2021-23 biennial budget included an increase in the annual Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) allocation for safety services (TSSF) by \$1,000,000 annually. As a result, in fall 2021, DCF supplemented 2021 contracts for those agencies and tribes with TSSF with a one-time funding increase from part of the funds allocated in the 2021-2023 biennial budget.

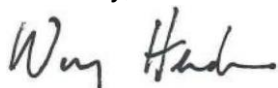
In addition, DCF will be distributing a total of \$10 million of excess earned federal Title IV-E foster care reimbursement funds from non-Milwaukee County child welfare administrative and out-of-home care expenses to all balance of state county and tribal child welfare agencies as part of the current TSSF program to help support families in-home. DCF anticipates being able to sustain annual allocation of at least \$5 million for future periods, but the exact amount of any additional funds to support the base TSSF awards will vary depending on excess IV-E generated in the previous state fiscal year.

DCF also encourages local child welfare agencies to consider using TSSF funds in conjunction with [other funding sources](#), such as Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF), which supports further upstream prevention. These funds can be used in three categories: Family Preservation, Family Reunification, and Family Support services.

DCF will continue explore ways to support increased investments to better serve children in their family homes, including through other available funds and the use of evidence-based in-home prevention and family support services.

DCF continues to acknowledge and appreciate the continued efforts put forth by the Marathon County Citizen Review Panel for their continued advocacy. Thank you for the time, energy, and commitment you have made to improve services for Wisconsin children and their families.

Sincerely,



Wendy Henderson
Division Administrator