

Wisconsin Citizen Review Panel (CRP) 2024-2025 Statewide Report

Wis. Stat. § 48.47(9)

**Division of Safety and
Permanence**

December 2025



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A Letter from the Administrator

Thank you for taking the time to read the Wisconsin Citizen Review Panel 2024–2025 Statewide Report. Wisconsin Citizen Review Panels (CRPs) are represented by a wide array of citizen volunteers, including those with lived experience in the child welfare system. CRP's partner with local child welfare agencies to ensure that the needed support systems provide the best possible services, prevent and protect children from abuse and neglect, and meet the permanency needs of children. Furthermore, the CRPs play an important role in efforts to promote positive child welfare outcomes for children and families.

The 2024–2025 CRP Statewide Report contains an update on each panel's work throughout 2024 and 2025 and their recommendations for enhancements to policy, procedure, and practice within Wisconsin's child protection system. Each panel's recommendations and the Department's responses to these recommendations are contained in the report.

The Department of Children and Families (DCF), Division of Safety and Permanence (DSP) welcomes the panel's collaboration, including recommendations for improvement. DCF recognizes each member for their passion, time, and dedication to ensuring the safety, permanency and well-being of children and families. DCF believes that working together to strengthen families leads to safe, nurturing, and healthy environments for children. By improving our child welfare system, we are closer to realizing our shared vision that all "Wisconsin children and youth are safe loved members of thriving families and communities". DCF expresses appreciation to the CRP members for their ongoing work and dedication in these efforts.

John Elliott
Division of Safety and Permanence Administrator
Wisconsin Department of Children and Families



Introduction



Structure of Child Welfare in Wisconsin

Wisconsin is one of eleven states that operates a state-supervised, county-administered child welfare system. Specifically, Wisconsin's child welfare system is "hybrid", meaning that child welfare services are partially administered by the State, and partially administered by counties. Child welfare services in Milwaukee County, the state's most populous county, are administered by the Department of Children and Families (DCF), Division of Milwaukee Child Protective Services (DMCPS). Child welfare services, including child protective services (CPS) and youth justice (YJ), in the balance of the state (BOS) are administered by county child welfare agencies.

The Division of Safety and Permanence (DSP) is the state agency within DCF that supports the supervision of quality services and best practices designed to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of children, youth, and families in Wisconsin. There are some intrinsic differences in operating a hybrid state-supervised, county-administered system that impacts statewide outcomes for children and families. Within this structure, Wisconsin provides the statutory and policy framework for delivery of child welfare services and monitors local implementation. Given the variation that exists among the 72 counties, this structure allows for the development of county-specific solutions to address the strengths and needs of families and communities.

Each county, through planning efforts, must develop strategies to improve outcomes. This allows for local flexibility to identify unique solutions to local problems. While there are many benefits to this local flexibility, this structure can also present challenges in ensuring consistent application of policy, and program initiatives. Because of the variance in county practice, it is often challenging to identify statewide solutions that would have the most impact on improving local child welfare service outcomes.



Overview of Citizen Review Panels

Citizen Review Panels & the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) (Public Law (P.L.) 93-247), originally enacted in 1974, is the primary federal legislation addressing child abuse and neglect. CAPTA provides federal funding to states in support of prevention, assessment, investigation, prosecution, and treatment activities, and sets requirements that states must meet in order to receive federal CAPTA funding.

Citizen Review Panels (CRPs) were developed in response to a requirement set forth in the 1996 reauthorization of CAPTA. Section 106 (c) of CAPTA requires each State to establish a minimum of three CRPs. States, however, have the flexibility to implement the CAPTA requirements in ways that best meet their needs, so long as the panels meet the requirements. Panel members must be volunteers and include those who have expertise in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect. Panel members may include adult former victims of child abuse or neglect. Panels are charged with the review of policies, procedures, and practices. They are required to meet once every three months, at a minimum.

Nationally, CRPs vary in design, function, and child welfare system impact. CRPs serve to promote positive child welfare outcomes at the local, state, and national levels. Panels are very diverse in terms of the support received, how membership is appointed, and the composition of the annual report. Some panels do not receive public funding, while others receive funding via the CAPTA dollars that are received by a state. Members may be elected or appointed by state child welfare systems or legislative bodies. The CRP annual report may be written by group members or a designee, and responses to the report from the state vary widely around the nation.



Overview of Citizen Review Panels

CRP Functions

The primary purpose of Citizen Review Panels is to assist state and local child protection systems in improving services through evaluation, public outreach, and advocacy. CRPs may also examine other factors that it considers important to ensuring the protection of children.

Specific CRP functions include:

- Examining state and local child welfare agency policies to evaluate the extent to which agencies are effectively fulfilling child protection responsibilities.
- Reviewing specific cases, including child fatalities and near fatalities, where appropriate.
- Making policy and practice recommendations for system improvement.
- Advocating for relevant actions that help improve the child protective services system.
- Providing opportunities for public outreach and comment, as necessary.
- Preparing and submitting an annual report summarizing the activities of the panel, including recommendations to improve the CPS system. The state child welfare agency is required to respond to this report within six months.

Panels are comprised of volunteer community members broadly representative of the community in which the panel is established. Panels represent a partnership among community members, local child protection agencies and the state child welfare agency.



Wisconsin Citizen Review Panels

In Wisconsin, CRPs represent a partnership among community members, local child welfare agencies, and DCF. Wisconsin first established panels beginning in 2001. There are currently seven panels operating across the state:

1. Jefferson County Citizen Review Panel
2. Langlade County Citizen Review Panel
3. Milwaukee Child Welfare Partnership Council
4. Citizen Review Panel Serving Outagamie County
5. Polk County Citizen Review Panel
6. St. Croix County Citizen Review Panel
7. Youth Advisory Council



Each panel functions autonomously and independent of DCF. Panels have their own CRP chairs and coordinator. They recruit and select their own members. Additionally, panels determine their own activities and efforts based on the needs of the communities and people they serve.

DCF provides oversight and technical assistance to Wisconsin's panels. This includes regular communication, such as facilitating quarterly meetings with the panel coordinators and chairs. The DCF CRP coordinator is also responsible for planning the Statewide CRP Meeting each year. This meeting is open to all CRP members throughout the state. The DCF CRP coordinator assists CRPs in recognizing how, where and when recommendations are connected to the Putting Families First Framework, which is described in further detail below.

Citizen Review Panel Reporting Process

Each panel is required to prepare an annual report summarizing their activities throughout the year and provide recommendations to improve the child protection system at both the state and local level. Upon receiving the reports, DCF drafts and submits written responses to the recommendations to describe whether or how the Department will incorporate the recommendations of the panels.

In prior years, reports have been completed on a calendar year basis. However, beginning in 2022, the reporting period shifted to align with the fiscal year and panel contracts.

The following report covers a 12-month timeframe from July 1, 2024, through June 30, 2025, aligning with the fiscal year (July 1 – June 30).

Wisconsin Legislature

In 2022, the Wisconsin state legislature passed 2021 Wisconsin Act 147, a new statute requiring the transmission of the CRP annual reports and DCF responses to the appropriate standing committees of the legislature. This requirement took effect on January 1, 2023.

Wisconsin Citizen Review Panels

Wisconsin Vision and Focus

Since 2018, Wisconsin has been working toward transforming the child welfare system to become more family-focused, collaborative and to support children and families in their homes. These efforts to Put Families First were bolstered by federal legislation such as the [Family First Prevention Services Act \(FFPSA\)](#).

Vision

All Wisconsin children and youth are safe and loved members of thriving families and communities.

Putting Families First aims to dramatically reduce the proportion of child protective services (CPS) and youth justice (YJ) children and youth who are placed into out-of-home care, especially those that are served outside of their community or in congregate care settings. This shift in the system began when research indicated that children and families served by both the youth justice and child protection system have better results when supported in their family homes. This transformation is focused on keeping families and children together by serving them in-home with resources and services.

Three Transformation Priorities

- 1 Strengthening local communities and building services to support families in their homes.
- 2 Keeping children in family settings whenever possible.
- 3 Supporting the workforce with solutions and improvements.

Wisconsin CRPs are Putting Families First

In 2022, DCF began working with Wisconsin's Citizen Review Panels to align each panel's efforts with the statewide Putting Families First initiative. These efforts include advocating for the needs of their communities, assisting in meeting those needs, incorporating and elevating lived experience voices, and serving as a connection point between families and services, as well as communities and agencies. In serving as this connection point, Wisconsin's CRPs are working to spread awareness of Putting Families First, reducing trauma, and elevating the importance of children remaining with their families. Several panels have also worked to support Wisconsin's child welfare workforce.



Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

Jefferson County Citizen Review Panel

The Jefferson County Citizen Review Panel is in the southeastern part of the state in Jefferson County.

Key Activities

Public Outreach

The panel provides for public outreach via the distribution of brochures and through sponsoring local events and initiatives. The panel is planning on creating a 1-page handout about the panel's mission, projects sponsored, as well as who to contact to provide feedback or suggest potential projects the CRP could sponsor or get involved in.

Case Reviews

The panel did not conduct any case reviews.

Other Panel Activities

- Sponsored a community collaboration kickball team event for youth involved with the Youth Justice System, bringing together the youth, human services staff and local law enforcement officers.
- Supported an all-day training for Jefferson County foster parents which included shared parenting, lived experience panel, trauma-informed parenting, mental health awareness and Dialectical Behavior Therapy skills for children.
- Supported Child Abuse Prevention and Awareness Month by providing pinwheel gardens to increase awareness in the community. Supported the purchase of coloring books to educate children on safe/unsafe touching.
- Purchased books for the foster care team to increase their library of resources for foster parents and children.



Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

Jefferson County Citizen Review Panel

Other Panel Activities continued...

- Provided support to the Coordinated Services Team (CST) Wraparound services in Jefferson County to build a community garden in the back of the Human Services building. Families and children enrolled in the program worked together in caring for the gardens. Food and flowers harvested went to families in need.
- Supported additional community education and awareness efforts on Mandated Supporter by printing and supplying desk guides and resources at informational meetings as well as other events in Jefferson County.
- Supported fund raising for Youth Justice Month leading to establishing funds to assist youth with fees associated with participating in extracurricular activities.
- Supported the purchase of updated curriculum materials for The Incredible Years Parenting Program.

Panel Recommendations

The Jefferson County Citizen Review Panel did not advance any state-level CPS system recommendations for the Departments consideration.

DCF Response

Thank you for your timely submission of the Jefferson County Citizen Review Panel annual report in compliance with the Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). The panel did not submit any specific recommendations, so please accept this written response as acknowledgement that we have received and reviewed your report.

[**Read the Jefferson County Citizen Review Panel Report**](#)



Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

Langlade County Citizen Review Panel

The Langlade County Citizen Review Panel is in the northeastern part of the state in Langlade County.

Key Activities

Public Outreach

The panel has several avenues to providing public outreach. The panel regularly reaches out to community partners to ask for their feedback and input. They sponsor local events and initiatives which promote strengthening families. The panel regularly shares information regarding their activities at coalition and taskforce meetings throughout the community. The panel has a Facebook page used to share resources in the community.

Case Reviews

The panel, in collaboration with the local child welfare agency, conducted one case review.

Other Panel Activities

- The panel hosted several appreciation events during Social Work Appreciation Month for the Langlade social work team.
- The panel promoted Family Strengthening Month by having a display at their local fairgrounds.
- The panel provided funding for a foster parent Appreciation meal hosted at the department for Foster Care appreciation Month.
- The panel supported foster parents by providing meals and support groups. This included an out-of-home care event for foster parents and children.
- Provided funding for an installing a washer and dryer at the local agency to ensure children's belongings and clothing could be laundered.
- The panel also allocated funds to promote their local community health fair.
- Supported their local agency with foster parent recruitment.



Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

Langlade County Citizen Review Panel

Panel Recommendations

The Langlade County Citizen Review Panel did not advance any state-level CPS recommendations for the department's consideration.

DCF Response

Thank you for your timely submission of the Langlade County Citizen Review Panel annual report in compliance with the Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). The panel did not submit any specific recommendations, so please accept this written response as acknowledgement that we have received and reviewed your report.

[**Read the Langlade County Citizen Review Panel Report**](#)



Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

Milwaukee Child Welfare Partnership Council

The Milwaukee Child Welfare Partnership Council (MCWPC) is in the southeastern part of the state in Milwaukee County. MCWPC functions slightly differently than other CRPs in Wisconsin. MCWPC was designated as a CRP for Milwaukee County under [Wis. Stat. § 48.562](#).



Key Activities

Public Outreach

The panel provides meetings in a public forum to allow for community participation via zoom. The MCWPC complies with all open meeting laws. This includes posting information about the meetings and materials on the DCF and DOA websites in advance. The meetings are also published in local newspapers as well as Division of Milwaukee Child Protective Services (DMCPS) offices. Email invitations for the meetings are sent to a mailing list of community members who have requested to receive notice of meetings. Time is left on each agenda for community input.

Case Reviews

The panel did not conduct any case reviews during this review period.

Other Panel Activities

- MCWPC supports prevention work to reduce the number of children in out-of-home care placed in congregate care settings.
- MCWPC supported DMCPS Breaking Barrier's project with Casey Family Programs aimed to reduce the congregate care population and to keep youth in family settings. This project concluded in 2025 with an overall 34 percent reduction of youth in congregate care in Milwaukee County.
- MCWPC revised their subcommittees to better align with the needs of the families and youth in Milwaukee County to support interagency collaboration among public health agencies, CPS agencies, and private community-based agencies. The new committees are focusing on prevention services and teen care populations.

Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

Milwaukee Child Welfare Partnership Council

Other Panel Activities continued...

- The Community Prevention and Support Committee works to identify needs of families who are involved with CPS and identify opportunities to prevent entry for into out-of-home care. The committee addresses issues relating to service gaps and access to services.
- The Teen Care Committee partners with DMCPS on creating successful interventions to help teens remain at home. The committee focuses on strategies to keep teens in family homes vs group or residential settings.
- The MCWPC agendas and minutes can be found [Milwaukee Child Welfare Partnership Council](#).

Panel Recommendations

- 1 Requirement to complete comprehensive background checks on all individual(s) who may visit the family home/household who have access to the child(ren). These individuals may not live there and are frequent visitors. This information should inform the safety assessment of the home.

DCF Response

DCF provides our local agency partners with policies and standards guiding the State of Wisconsin Child Welfare System. The following standards specify the requirements necessary to perform Child Protective Services practice in the state of Wisconsin.

[Wisconsin Child Welfare Policies and Standards](#)

Wisconsin statute does not require background checks for visitors and DCF does not have a policy for background checks on visitors; however, child welfare professionals assessing child safety in a home can conduct background checks as permitted by law if it is contributing to the safety of a child.

Child welfare professionals use a safety decision-making model to identify danger threats in families and background checks are a useful tool; however, solely completing a background check is not indicative of danger threats and/or child safety. Child welfare professionals use a combination of tools to identify danger threats and collaborate with the family to develop safety plans that are the least intrusive to the family.



Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

Milwaukee Child Welfare Partnership Council

Panel Recommendations continued...

- 2 Track and evaluate child(ren) who return to the CPS system after a public adoption to understand why the child(ren) returned to care and work to ensure the child(ren) will reach timely permanency.

DCF Response

DCF appreciates the Milwaukee Child Welfare Partnership Council's recommendation to track and evaluate child(ren) who return to the CPS system after a public adoption and to work to ensure that these children reach timely permanency. As a state agency we encounter systemic barriers which challenge the integrity of our data which make it difficult to comprehensively track children who return to the child welfare system after their adoptions have been finalized. When a child enters out of home care, agencies are able record if a child was adopted on the person management page. This data is reflected on our placement detail reports. The accuracy of the data is dependent on the parent(s) or child self-reporting as well as agencies recording the information. Overall, the data can be entered and tracked, but the fidelity of the information can be difficult to ascertain. Due to confidentiality of adoption records, once a child is adopted their case is disconnected from their birth parent.

Adoption related data has been incorporated into DCF's annual Out of Home Care Report. The department has ongoing efforts to ensure data related to public adoption outcomes can be tracked and used for program improvement. [Child Welfare Reports and Dashboards](#). DCF is interested in better understanding re-entry to OHC after adoption finalization and is invested in enhancing post permanency supports through post permanency programs.

In addition, the Wisconsin Child Welfare Policies and Standards provide a resource for the state rules and regulations including standard on permanency planning. [Wisconsin Child Welfare Policies and Standards](#).

DCF continues to acknowledge and appreciate the continued efforts put forth by the Milwaukee Child Welfare Partnership Council and your continued advocacy. Thank you for your time, energy, and commitment you have made to improve services for Wisconsin children and their families.

Read the [Milwaukee Child Welfare Partnership Council Report](#)

Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

Citizen Review Panel Serving Outagamie County

The Citizen Review Panel serving Outagamie County is in the northeastern part of the state in Outagamie County.

Key Activities

Public Outreach

The panel provides for public outreach via a public Facebook page. The panel posts regularly to help the community learn about issues facing children and families and about events that are held. The panel informs the public regarding the county agencies mandatory reporter trainings through their member networks.

Case Reviews

The panel, in collaboration with the local child welfare agency, conducted two case reviews.

Other Panel Activities

- The panel partnered with their local agencies to provide funding for a foster care commercial on their local network television station and website.
- The panel provided several social worker appreciation events at their local agency.
- Worked with their local agency on sponsoring a training for workers.
- Spoke at the Outagamie County budget hearing to support the Human Services Department in their request for an additional position to support children in home with their families.
- The panel has a regular subcommittee Judicial Enhancement Team (JET) dedicated to “improving the court process.”
- The panel regularly supports Family Strengthening Month.



Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

Citizen Review Panel Serving Outagamie County

Panel Recommendations

- 1 Find ways that allow counties to obtain placement acceptance for high acuity children and youth in the least restrictive setting by looking into why placements are being declined, monitoring the rate group homes are charging including their adding in extra charges for high need children that are above and beyond what is affordable, and looking into necessary statute changes that would allow for locked psychiatric residential treatment facilities in Wisconsin.

DCF Response

DCF appreciates the panel's commitment to advocating for children in Wisconsin who have high acuity needs. DCF recognizes that these are continued recommendations and acknowledges and appreciates the continued efforts put forth by the Citizen Review Panel serving Outagamie County for their continued advocacy in bringing this issue to the attention of the Wisconsin Legislature.

DCF is aware of and empathetic towards the difficulties local agencies have in finding and paying for appropriate placements and acknowledges the frustration surrounding denials. DCF continues to work towards improving the referral portal [Supporting Youth and Children \(SYNC\)](#) to best understand the admission and denial decisions to help address the gaps and challenges in our current continuum of care.

DCF recently issued a numbered memo: [2026 Maximum Daily Rates for Group Homes, Residential Care Centers, and Child Placing Agencies](#) which addresses the maximum daily rates for residential care centers, group homes and child placing agencies. DCF is committed to supporting facilities to become [Qualified Residential Treatment Programs \(Q RTP\)](#) and to support them in building programs that provide specialized, high quality clinical care to meet the needs of children and youth, including those currently placed out of state.

In addition, DCF is collaborating with Wisconsin child serving agencies, the Department of Health Services, the Department of Public Instruction, and the Office of Children's Mental Health on a proposal called **Wisconsin Wraparound**. More information on this effort can be [found on the DCF website](#).



Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

Citizen Review Panel Serving Outagamie County

Panel Recommendations

1

DCF Response continued...

The governor allocated [American Rescue Plan Act](#) dollars to support DCF in meeting the complex need of children and youth with high acuity needs. One of the current priorities in the Department of Health Services (DHS) Children Come First Advisory Committee's strategic planning process for 2024–2030 is crisis support, specialized residential services and supports.

Finally, in the most recent biennial budget, 1.8 million in funding was allocated to DHS to establish a 25-bed psychiatric residential treatment facility (PRTF) to provide psychiatric care and treatment to children and youths under the age of 21 with complex behavioral health conditions. DHS has indicated that they intend to work with external partners as they establish this new facility type.

In addition, [2025 Wisconsin Act 9](#), governing certification, regulation, and administration of PRTFs, was enacted in July 2025.

2

Offer more training for staff and foster families; offer trainings at each county particular to that county's experiences, especially around secondary trauma as well as a combined training for staff and placement providers to build trust and help with productive, supportive communications.

DCF Response

DCF recognizes and appreciates the Panel's continued recommendation to support local child welfare agencies, child welfare professionals and foster parents who experience secondary trauma.

Local agencies and their workforce have a variety of resources available regarding secondary trauma. DCF created the [Wisconsin Well](#) a website that offers resources around agency culture, organization and team building, including concepts around secondary trauma. The materials offered on the website are meant to support agencies in creating safe work environments that support staff in their work. The child welfare workforce experiences difficult situations, sometimes having to help families through critical incidents. DCF models a process for reviewing such incidents that is collaborative and mitigates secondary trauma for professionals who are involved.



Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

Citizen Review Panel Serving Outagamie County

Panel Recommendations

2 DCF Response continued...

DCF has partnered with WCWPDS for a new foster/adoptive parent training curriculum. Effective August 1, 2025, the new curriculum Nurturing Connections is available through the [Wisconsin Child Welfare Professional Development System](#). Nurturing Connections draws on the lived experience of foster and adoptive families, former foster and adopted youth, as well as up-to-date research. This curriculum, National Training and Development Curriculum (NTDC) has been developed and provided by Spaulding for Children in close partnership with other agencies. In addition to this statewide training opportunity, many agencies provide their own local training including trauma informed parenting and shared parenting.

DCF also partners with the [Coalition for Children, Youth & Families](#) who provides trainings specifically for caregivers of children in out-of-home care. The Coalition Classroom provides webinars and hybrid training opportunities focusing on topics related to co-parenting relationships between birth and foster parents. In addition, support is offered through [Wisconsin Family Connections Center](#) which provides a safe, welcoming space for families and communities impacted by the child welfare system.

DCF will continue to offer secondary trauma information and resources into shared spaces with child welfare professionals, parents and foster parents to enhance relationships.

3 Work with DPI on education payments when kids are placed out of state. Money should be rerouted from school to the county that has to pay for the child's education. Out of State placement education payments should be a shared responsibility between the school district and the county placing the child.

DCF Response

DCF acknowledges this important recommendation regarding youth who are placed out of state having their educational needs met. DCF and the Department of Public Instruction(DPI) have a long-standing partnership focused on supporting educational stability for youth placed in out-of-home care.

The Department of Public Instruction has State, Federal Aid as well as Grant programs for children to meet their educational needs. [State Tuition | Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction](#).



Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

Citizen Review Panel Serving Outagamie County

Panel Recommendations

3

DCF Response continued...

DCF's continued partnership with DPI on Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) [Supporting Students in Out-of-Home Care](#) provides several resources to ensure youth are successful when transferring schools while in out-of-home care.

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

Read the [Citizen Review Panel Serving Outagamie County Report](#)



Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

Polk County Citizen Review Panel

The Polk County Citizen Review Panel is in the western part of the state in Polk County.

Key Activities

Public Outreach

The panel conducts public outreach through multiple projects that benefit families throughout the county, as well as local nonprofits and school districts. Additionally, the panel was able to assess current procedures through the case review they completed.



Case Reviews

The panel, in collaboration with the local child welfare agency, completed one case review.

Other Panel Activities

- The panel provided funding to the local child welfare agency to support families with gas cards, drug screens and assistance with visitation.
- The panel provided support for community programs to provide training to their workforce including:
 - Trust Based Relationship Intervention training
 - Recovering Together Café supported by the Mental Health Task Force
 - Field Safety Training
 - De-escalation Training
- The panel provided appreciation gifts for social workers, forensic nurses, law enforcement and behavioral health staff.
- The panel supported Child Abuse and Prevention activities for local agencies and schools in their county.
- The panel provided financial support for social worker licensure renewal fees for their local agency social workers.

Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

Polk County Citizen Review Panel

Panel Recommendations

- 1 Recognizing the challenges faced by families with high-needs children, it is proposed that the State consider implementing a financial support program similar to the IRIS program for adults. This proposed program would offer financial assistance to parents and caregivers who are unable to work due to their children's significant needs. In situations where parents and caregivers must prioritize their children's well-being over their professional obligations, providing financial support can help alleviate the stress and strain on these families. By offering financial assistance, the State can help ensure that families with high-needs children can maintain a stable home environment while addressing their children's unique challenges. This approach not only benefits the families, but also fosters the overall well-being of the community by promoting the proper care and support for these children.

DCF Response

DCF recognizes the importance of this recommendation and appreciates the Polk County Citizen Review Panel in advocating to provide financial support to Wisconsin families who have a child with high needs. DCF does not have an equivalent program to IRIS for children. DCF is committed to families having concrete supports to meet the needs of their children. DCF partners with the Department of Health Services, specifically around programs like [Birth to 3 Program](#), [Children's Long-Term Support Program](#) and [Comprehensive Community Services](#). These programs serve children and young adults under the age of 22 with significant developmental, physical or emotional disabilities. [The Wisconsin Wayfinder](#) is an essential children's resource that parents, caregivers and professionals can use to get assistance and connect with helpers on a wide variety of needs for children who have delays, disabilities, special health care needs and mental health conditions.

In addition to these existing supports, DCF is collaborating with Wisconsin child serving agencies, including DHS, DPI, the Office of Children's Mental Health on a proposal called **Wisconsin Wraparound**. More information on this effort can be [found on the DCF website](#). This effort recognizes what we've heard from key partners, including CRPs, that behavioral health services are fragmented, and that children and youth are entering the child welfare system because of behavioral health needs, not because of abuse or neglect.



Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

Polk County Citizen Review Panel

Panel Recommendations

1

DCF Response continued...

The goal of this project is:

- To better serve children and youth with complex behavioral health needs.
- To serve these kids and their families in communities across the state through high fidelity and targeted wraparound services.
- To intervene earlier to reduce child welfare involvement.
- To fill gaps in existing local programs like Comprehensive Community Services (CCS) and Children's Long-Term Support (CLTS)

The proposal would provide Wraparound Care Coordination to provide individualized, team-based services to children and their families. Families would be able to be referred for services through, health systems, schools or child welfare systems. Families would receive mental health services, parental capacity building and access to concrete supports.

Citizen Review Panels can have a meaningful and important impact on moving this effort forward. In order for DHS, DCF and DPI to continue work on this statewide opportunity, the Legislature must direct DHS to request a federal waiver. This can be done through passage of standalone legislative bill, LRB-947. Reaching out to state senators and legislators about the importance of this effort, and how it could make a difference in Polk County could help this legislation move forward.

2

To overcome the challenges associated with placing children across state lines, particularly in the case of Polk County and its proximity to Minnesota, it is crucial to develop an efficient and expedited process for interstate placements, even if they are temporary.

DCF Response

DCF acknowledges there are challenges when placing children in other states. The

Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) [48.988](#) is a law that ensures children moving from state to state under court jurisdiction have the same rights and protections as children in Wisconsin. ICPC is a statutory law and legal agreement with administrative procedures governing the interstate placement of children. This compact includes all 50 states, US Virgin Islands and District of Columbia.

Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

Polk County Citizen Review Panel

Panel Recommendations

2

DCF Response continued...

The compact has not been adopted by Puerto Rico, but ICPC requests are accepted. ICPC is in place to assure safety and supervision is provided. In Wisconsin we have an ICPC team who coordinates efforts to place children in other states, including court ordered placements with relatives. This includes kinship care placements when there is a court order in place. ICPC is responsible for ensuring that county agencies are following the requirements set out by the Interstate Compact when preparing to place children out of state and to ensure the same when monitoring a child placed in-state by a jurisdiction outside of Wisconsin.

Wisconsin DCF is currently in the collaborative planning process with Minnesota to begin an ICPC border agreement pilot project. Both states are interested in establishing a border agreement process in order to expedite safe placement with relatives and kin across state lines. Through data analysis of ICPC placement requests, counties in both states have been identified as good candidates to participate in the pilot. DCF would like to begin piloting the border agreements process by early 2026. The ICPC border agreement would apply to child welfare cases at the time of initial removal of a child. Additionally, the agreement could also apply later in a case if there is a disruption in a child's placement by allowing for the child to be with relatives/like kin across the border as a change of placement.

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

[**Read the Polk County Citizen Review Panel**](#)



Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

St. Croix County Citizen Review Panel

The St. Croix County Citizen Review Panel is in the western part of the state in St. Croix County.

Key Activities

Public Outreach

The panel throughout the year partners with their local school districts and local non-profit's in holding community events to benefit children and families in their community.

Case Reviews

The panel did not conduct any case reviews during this review period.

Other Panel Activities

- The panel supported a public speaker in the community who shared his experience being in foster care.
- The panel supports families in need who are working with either their local CPS agency or domestic violence shelter with gas and grocery cards.
- Social Worker appreciation was expressed by the panel providing gift cards for the workers to a local coffee shop.
- During Family Strengthening Month the panel partnered with a local school district to provide a family fun event.
- The panel provided public outreach by partnering with and sponsoring the Shop with a Cop program with the County Sheriff's Office.
- The panel supported Child Abuse Prevention by placing pinwheels outside their local Government Center.
- The panel partnered with Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) to provide support bracelets for children and families served through this advocacy service.
- The panel was able to support three CPS staff members to attend a patrol officer in-service training.



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St. Croix County Citizen Review Panel

Panel Recommendations

1 Collaboration with Community Partners regarding educating the Community about the Families First Initiative

DCF Response

DCF appreciates the panel's recommendation regarding collaboration in local communities on how Wisconsin is Putting Families First. Since 2018, Wisconsin has been transforming the child welfare system to be more family-focused and collaborative in supporting more children and families in-home. DCF is committed to three key strategies to create meaningful and lasting transformation:

1. Strengthening local communities and building services to support families in their homes.
2. Keeping children in family settings whenever possible.
3. Supporting the workforce with solutions and improvements.

While the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) makes every effort to reach a wide range of partner groups at the state level, a crucial piece of system transformation is having key conversations with partners at the agency level. Over the past few years, there have been real, transformative changes happening through local advocacy and partnership. To aid in this effort, DCF, in partnership with agency and local leaders, developed a series of resources to support local conversations between child welfare agencies and key community partners. This resource is called the [Putting Families First Playbook](#). Information is tailored to various local partners including law enforcement, schools, county boards and more. These materials cover what partners can expect from the transformation and include success stories and quotes from partners themselves. Agency leaders can use the information, quotes and stories when preparing for or holding discussions about the strategic transformation.

DCF has a [Communication Toolbox](#) on our website as well as opportunity to sign up for a [Newsletter](#) to follow monthly updates.

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

Read the [St. Croix County Citizen Review Panel Report](#)

Overview of Panel Reports & Activities

Youth Advisory Council

The [Wisconsin Youth Advisory Council \(YAC\)](#) began in 2005 and consists of former and current youth in the foster care system who provide a voice for all foster care youth in Wisconsin. Youth generally begin their involvement in advisory work by serving in regional councils and have the ability to become members of the Statewide Youth Advisory Council.



Key Activities

Public Outreach

Every year the State YAC practices strategic sharing training which helps the members of local and state YACs to effectively speak on their life stories to panels state-wide and locally in an effective manner. The board hosted Strategic sharing meetings to empower local and state YAC members. YAC was able to gather feedback from alumni in out-of-home care through hosting their first annual hub site meeting. This meeting had representation from 6 of the 7 regional YACs. The YAC secretary monitors and responds to public outreach and comments through their Facebook page. YAC members continue to speak on panels to educate those who work with children and families. YACs focus when presenting is on the importance of meaningful inclusion and continued engagement of the youth voice in case planning, systems change, and all decisions impacting youth well-being. The YAC engages in discussion with legislators on pressing issues during legislative day. This provides a direct line of communication between policy makers and the YAC members.

Case Reviews

The panel did not conduct any case reviews.



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Youth Advisory Council

Other Panel Activities

- The state YAC has been spreading awareness for Foster Care Awareness month virtually on the panel's Facebook page.
- The state YAC sent members to attend the Daniel's National Independent Living Conference in Orlando, FL.
- YAC held a Legislative Day in May 2025. This focused on bringing YAC members to the Capitol to speak with Legislators regarding funding and eligibility requirements for Independent Living.
- Youth Advisory Councils in Wisconsin are active in initiatives that support and improve the child welfare system. Some of the activities they participated in this year:
 - Creating social media platforms
 - Panel participation at an agency foster parent appreciation luncheon
 - KINspiration events held throughout the state
 - Presentation at the CASA conference
 - Foster Youth Graduation Celebration
 - TRA Strategic Sharing training

Panel Recommendations

1 The YAC made the following recommendations as part of their Legislative Advocacy Day in May of 2025:

Ensure state-level Independent Living funding to broaden who is eligible for Independent Living (IL) services and supports in Wisconsin to align with Federal guidelines.

Wisconsin YAC members know because of lack of funding, currently Wisconsin has much narrower IL eligibility than what is federally allowable. They have heard from both peers and adults supporting transition-age-youth that the eligibility criteria is confusing to both adults and the youth they serve. need more funding to meet the scale and scope of eligible youth's needs. Agencies providing IL services have not...



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...received funding increases even as the qualifying youth population has grown, youth retention in the program has increased, the gap between staff capacity and client needs has widened, and the cost (salaries, fringe, etc.) of hiring and keeping quality staff has gone up. Many TRAs have to pursue external funding in addition to the IL allocation to meeting the needs of their IL clients, especially in high-cost areas like housing.

According to a survey of 1,000 parents across the country, in 2024, the share of parents partially financially supporting a child older than 18 in America reached 50 percent. Parents now spend about \$1,474 a month, on average, on their adult children – a three-year high. For those from out-of-home care, the need for support, guidance, and help is the same as their peers, however the resources available vary greatly.

Currently, Independent Living funding cannot keep pace with the needs of youth, both because the costs of serving and supporting youth has increased as costs overall have increased and because the rising costs in other cost categories (e.g. staff salaries, administrative overhead, cost of living) is squeezing funds that would otherwise be applied to participant costs. During the public health crisis, DCF piloted expanded IL eligibility up to age 23 (it was previously age 21) to ensure that no one was “aging out” of Independent Living service eligibility at a time of extreme uncertainty. When sharing feedback with DCF, TRAs and their IL clients shared overwhelming support for continuing the option to serve young adults up to age 23. As a result, DCF permanently changed the program’s upper age eligibility to 23 in January 2023.

However, DCF had to do so without any additional funding since public health crisis stimulus funding had expired by then and the decision to serve youth to age 23 came with no additional federal funds. Receiving state funding would allow DCF to better support TRA partners’ services and supports for youth ages 21-23. This is crucial given the IL population’s needs, especially since we know that some youth are not ready/willing to engage in services right after aging out of care; this larger window allows time for them to re-engage and is better practice given what we know about brain development.



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DCF Response

DCF appreciates and will continue to amplify the Youth Advisory Council's (YAC) voice to elevate and advocate for the tangible and intangible needs of young adults who transition from out-of-home care. The Department echoes the sentiments shared by the Youth Advisory Council and applauds Governor Evers for including state funding to support Independent Living in the last biennial budget. While the proposed Independent Living funding did not pass through the Wisconsin Legislature Joint Finance subcommittee, that is not a result of lack of effort, or compelling data.

The Youth Advisory Council's leadership during Legislative Advocacy Day and willingness to engage with policymakers throughout the biennial budget process and follow-up with the Wisconsin Legislature afterwards is a powerful example of YAC's willingness to engage in systems change work with future generations of Wisconsin youth and families in mind. Young leaders with lived experience are credible connectors for the Wisconsin Legislature and the community that support youth transitioning from out-of-home care into adulthood with the necessary tools and help they need.

Lived experience stories carry weight and will ultimately help us move toward the changes recommended even if the process is slower than YAC members had hoped. DCF will continue to stress the urgency of these changes over the coming year and ensure the perspectives of those with lived experience are centered in those conversations.

DCF continues to acknowledge and appreciate the continued efforts put forth by the Youth Advisory Council and your continued advocacy. Thank you for your time, energy, and commitment you have made to improve services for Wisconsin children and their families.

[**Read the Youth Advisory Council Report**](#)

