



DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
DIVISION OF FAMILY AND ECONOMIC SECURITY
ADMINISTRATOR'S MEMO SERIES

DFES 24-05

ISSUE DATE: 7/30/2024
DISPOSAL DATE: 12/31/2026

- ACTION
- NOTICE

PROGRAM CATEGORIES:

- W-2 - Wisconsin Works
- RA - Refugee Assistance
- CS - Child Support
- CF - Children First
- TJ - Transitional Jobs
- TMJ - Transform Milwaukee Jobs

DATE: 7/30/2024

TO: Child Support Agency Directors
W-2 Agency Directors
Tribal Child Support Agency Directors
Tribal Economic Support Directors
DCF Regional Coordinators

FROM: Connie M. Chesnik
DFES Administrator

RE: 2025-2026 Children First Program Plan Proposals

PURPOSE

The purpose of this memo is to request plan proposals from agencies interested in providing Children First services during calendar years 2025 and 2026.

BACKGROUND

The Children First program provides case management services to connect noncustodial parents (NCPs) with employment and job search services for work, to provide opportunities for self-improvement through enhanced case management, and employment referrals. The goal of the program is that NCPs will obtain employment and pay court-ordered child support to their families.

Over the past 30 years, many NCPs have benefited from the additional case management services offered through participation in the Children First program. Child Support Agencies (CSAs) may elect to offer Children First services as an initial enforcement resource in lieu of taking more punitive enforcement steps. Offering additional case management services to the NCP will allow the CSA to determine whether the NCP is willing to cooperate in finding employment.

POLICY

Agencies interested in providing Children First services in 2025 and 2026, including those agencies that currently offer Children First services, must submit a new Children First Program Plan ([Attachment 1](#)) by October 14, 2024. The plan must include a Letter of Support from the CSAs in each county/tribe that will be served by the program. A sample Letter of Support is attached ([Attachment 2](#)).

As in previous years, each plan will be reviewed to determine whether it meets the core mission of the program. Agencies will be required to submit justification for the number of participant slots requested, and for currently participating agencies, the reason for any increase or decrease from the previous year. Funding will be allocated to selected agencies. Additionally, child support agencies are requested to provide methodology on how cases are prioritized to obtain Children First orders. The Bureau of Child Support (BCS) will notify the agencies selected and provide information regarding funding allocations for the 2025-2026 Children First plan period.

CREATIVE SERVICE PROVISION

Participating CSAs employ a hybrid service provision model based on the needs of individual participants and their ability or inability to receive in-person services, which may change from one day to the next. CSAs must accordingly be able to pivot in their service provision to meet the needs of program participants.

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) has had many months to observe new and innovative approaches to service delivery employed by our partners, and to learn which strategies have worked well and which have not. For this reason, we are including below a number of suggestions for agencies wishing to participate in Children First for the 2025-2026 contractual period.

Case Management Services

Wisconsin's CSAs have found that in addition to building rapport with program participants via face to face contact, maintaining frequent virtual contact, whether by phone, email, or social media platforms has helped to keep participants engaged in achieving program goals. Toward this end, CSAs have found it useful to provide program case managers with work cell phones to prevent them from having to block their personal phone numbers from being identified by program participants when they call. They have found that program participants are often unlikely to answer calls from blocked numbers.

When appropriate, social media platforms have also proven to be very effective in the delivery of services to program participants. Through the provision of virtual case management meetings, job interviews, and job readiness instruction, participants have been able to stay connected, receive guidance, and ask questions in real time.

Two social media platforms that Wisconsin's CSAs have found to be particularly effective in virtual services delivery are FaceTime and Google Meet.

Children First is an excellent program to support NCP's in finding jobs so that they can pay their child support obligation. BCS strongly encourages CSAs to consider offering these services to support NCPs in overcome barriers to employment.

CHILDREN FIRST FUNDING

Funding for the 2025-2026 program will be \$1.14 million each year. The amount of funding available for employment services and activities will be up to \$800 per participant. These funds **are not** eligible for federal financial participation (FFP). Services authorized under Title IV-D of the Social Security Act for the administration of the child support program or to meet the federal match requirements of the child support program do not qualify as Children First funding. Agencies will use the System for Payment and Reports of Contracts (SPARC) Line 0700 to report Children First employment services and activities with the participant.

Case management activities related to the program **are** eligible for 66% FFP reimbursement. Agencies will use SPARC Line 0701 to report Children First case management activities costs. DCF will report these expenditures through the OCSE-396 Child Support quarterly expenditure report.

Per OCSE PIQ 12-02, there are several ways child support funding may be used to achieve the program's core mission - collecting and disbursing payments to families. The following case management activities may contribute to improving child support outcomes:

- identifying noncustodial parents that are unemployed, underemployed, or experiencing other social and family circumstances that impede the parent's ability to pay child support
- making referrals to other service agencies
- tracking and monitoring child support payments
- follow-up and tracking noncustodial parents' activities where the court issued an order directing a noncustodial parent to attend a work program
- collecting and analyzing data, as well as entering documentation in the state child support system KIDS and (Wisconsin Works) system
- conducting timely reviews and modifications, and
- providing specialized enforcement

Case managers may be employed by private, public, or non-profit community organizations pursuant to a cooperative agreement or contract. If a case manager also performs functions unrelated to child support, the agency must allocate costs as appropriate.

DCF reserves the right to decline contracts with programs that are not meeting program requirements as referred to in this Administrator's Memo and the most recent (2023-2024) Children First Program Guide ([Attachment 3](#)). Additionally, the state reserves the right to make appropriate shifts in funding.

CHILDREN FIRST PROGRAM GUIDE AND WWP DATA ENTRY REQUIREMENT

The 2025-2026 Children First Program Guide attached to this memo, describes current state policies and procedures for program operation. The Children First agency is also strongly encouraged to collaborate with the child support case manager as well as the child support liaison in providing enhanced case management services. The child support agency must enter the court order information for Children First participation in KIDS before referring the participant for Children First services.

Children First case managers are required to enter participant data in the WWP on-line application. Case managers must also update the Community Alternative Response Emergency Services (CARES) system with pertinent participant information. The Children First provider will be able to use details entered in WWP to track NCP activities and progress in the completion of activities, job readiness assessments, and child support payments history, etc. At a minimum, to be eligible for reimbursement of state funding, Children First case managers are expected to complete the following processes in the WWP on-line application: Clearance, Request for Assistance, Referral/Enrollment, Informal Assessment, and Work History.

New Children First case managers may enroll in Children First and WWP training. Trainings will be scheduled based on training needs.

CHILDREN FIRST PROGRAM MONITORING

DCF will routinely monitor various aspects of program implementation and operation, including financial monitoring of Children First expenditures, as well as compliance with state statutes and policies.

Agencies are expected to demonstrate collaboration and partnerships with local, state, and community partners in their plan to provide services to Children First participants.

Children First agencies are also required to complete and submit a monthly electronic survey of drug screening, testing, and treatment results.

CHILDREN FIRST REQUIREMENTS AND STATUTORY AUTHORITY

The statutory authority and program requirements regarding the Children First program are contained in Wis. Stats. §§ 49.36, 767.55, 49.162 and Administrative Code DCF 154.

ACTION SUMMARY STATEMENT

Counties / W-2 agencies / Tribes and consortia who plan to offer Children First in 2025 and 2026 must do the following:

- Complete a Children First Program Plan form ([Attachment 1](#))
- Obtain a signed Letter of Support from each county/tribal child support office served by the Children First program ([Attachment 2](#))
- ***Submit the 2025-2026 Children First Program Plan and Letter(s) of Support to the Bureau of Child Support no later than October 14, 2024, using the email address below***

Mail to: WI Bureau of Child Support
ATTN: Ryan Whitehead
PO Box 7935
Madison WI 53707-7935

Email to: BCSINFO@Wisconsin.gov

If you are a child support agency with questions regarding the Children First program, please contact BCS via the KIDPOL Request Form, Subject Area Other – Policy Issues. Other agencies may contact BCS at BCSINFO@wisconsin.gov.

CONTACT: DCF Regional Coordinators

Attachments: 2025 - 2026 Children First Program Plan ([Attachment 1](#))
Child Support Agency Letter of Support ([Attachment 2](#))
2025 - 2026 Children First Program Guide ([Attachment 3](#))

cc: 2023 - 2024 Children First Agencies
BRO Regional Coordinators
Phyllis Fuller, BCS Director
Alicia Breininger, BCS Policy Section Manager