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No Surprise Here – Children and Youth do best when Growing up in a Family-like Setting

With the release of its latest KIDS COUNT® report titled [*Every Kid Needs a Family: Giving Children in the Child Welfare System the Best Chance for Success*](#), we call attention to what almost everyone knows instinctively and most of us take for granted, that children grow best when supported by strong and supportive relationships with their caregivers. Most often parents, sometimes other relatives, and in some cases foster families, provide children with what they need most – someone who cares about them. But nationally, the Casey Foundation estimates that nearly 57,000 children in our nation’s child welfare system live in some form of group out-of-home setting, not having the benefit of those more personal relationships and supports. That means that for every seven children removed from their parental home, one ends up living in a non-family setting.

“Based on our own personal experience, and research about child and adolescent development, we know how important stable and supportive family relationships are in our lives, often sustaining us through difficult challenges. It is no different for children and youth that end up being removed from their parental home,” said Ken Taylor, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families.

Wisconsin fares slightly better than the national average, with approximately 13% of our 6500 out-of-home placements being in non-family settings. Those placements may take the form of short term shelter care, up through longer term group homes, residential care or even a correctional placement. While these non-family placements are weighted toward older youth (i.e. teenagers) and children/youth with a disabilities, the Casey report points out that nationally, approximately 40% of those children/youth do not have a diagnosed disability that would preclude them from benefiting from a family-type placement.

The report highlights three recommendations, all of which have important implications for Wisconsin.

Recommendation 1: Expand the service array to ensure children remain in families.

Wisconsin needs to strengthen its preventive programs to help support families and keep them together. These services need to be directed to both parents and children and must address the trauma our families are dealing with. Too much of our service system is directed towards families after their children have been removed and placed in out-of-home care.

Recommendation 2: Recruit, strengthen and retain more relative and foster families

This is essential if Wisconsin is going to remain below the national average in non-family settings. If we want more of these caregivers to take care of our children, we need to value them by doing a better job of supporting them in the difficult work that they do and paying them enough to do it. One aspect of Wisconsin’s foster care system that requires further review is the payment rate for kinship care. Many kinship caregivers receive a rate of \$232 per month, about \$200 less than the standard rate for “regular” foster care.

Recommendation 3: Support decision making that ensures least restrictive placements

Based on our lower than average percent of children in non-family settings, Wisconsin does pretty well ensuring least restrictive placements. But that performance is not consistent across the state. Wisconsin’s child welfare services are delivered by the counties. This has the advantage that services are designed and delivered closer to communities, but has the disadvantage that they vary widely across the state. Within the 13% average of non-family placements, some counties have no kids in those settings, while at the other end of the spectrum one county has 38% of their children in non-family settings. One should expect some level of variation based on numerous factors, but this variation is too large. Similarly, within kinship care, some counties have no children in this type of placement, while other counties have over 50% of their children in kinship care. Again, this variation is too large and needs further examination.

Recruiting and supporting family-style placements for those children/youth who are removed from their home is hard work, but the emotional and developmental benefits for the youth who are placed in family settings are clear – they are better prepared to thrive in the future. And it also makes economic sense, as non-family placements can cost seven to ten times more to operate. “There will be times when a child/youth needs to be in a residential or group home setting, but let’s promote policies and investments that give every child the best shot at growing up in a safe and nurturing family-like environment”, said Taylor. “We need to work together to make that happen”.

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The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF), www.wccf.org is a multi-issue policy research and advocacy organization promoting statewide policies that promote a safe and health future for all children in Wisconsin. WCCF is a member of the KIDS COUNT® network sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation www.aecf.org.