



STATE SENATOR
LaTonya Johnson

WISCONSIN STATE SENATE

6TH DISTRICT

**Senate Committee on Human Services, Children and Families
Testimony on Senate Bill 294
October 14, 2021**

Good morning Chairman Jacque and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of this very important proposal—SB 294—which allows adoptive parents to complete in-person training requirements through a live video conference.

The risk of exposure to COVID-19 has delayed many adoptions in Wisconsin due to in-person training requirements. Under this bill, pre-adoptive parents will still receive the same interactive training via a virtual platform as they would in-person.

SB 294 does not eliminate in-person training. Instead, it brings pre-adoption training in line with foster care training requirements, which have the flexibility to conduct live interactive virtual trainings. Moreover, both virtual and in-person trainings may be offered, once the concerns surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic have been mitigated.

While crafting this bill, both the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families and the Wisconsin Association of Children and Family Agencies were consulted, and both agencies are in support of this legislation.

We all want to see Wisconsin's children find their forever home, but parents shouldn't have to choose between their health and taking a six hour, in-person training in order to achieve it. This bill is a common sense solution that will allow children and families to reach adoption finalization more quickly, without having to take unnecessary risks.

Once again, thank you to committee members for your consideration of this important piece of legislation, and thank you to my co-author, Rep. Snodgrass for her hard work on this bipartisan bill.

**Senate Committee on Human Services, Children and Families
Testimony on Senate Bill 294
October 14, 2021**

Good morning Chairman Jacque and members of the committee,

It is my honor to be here with you this afternoon offering testimony on SB 294/AB197 related to pre-adoption training formats. Before I get into testimony I want to first express my gratitude to Senator Andre Jacque for scheduling this bill and then re-scheduling it after his long battle with COVID-19. I join others in this room who continue to wish Senator Jacque a full recovery. I also want to thank my neighboring Republican legislative colleagues, Senator Roth and Representative Tusler for joining me as leads on this important bill.

This proposed legislation came about in what I believe is the best way bills become a reality--from a genuine need brought forth by a constituent. Shortly after I was sworn in, I was talking with a constituent who was in the process of becoming eligible to be an adoptive parent. If you recall, January was a time when COVID-19 vaccinations were not yet widely available and most of the world had shifted to virtual options for getting things done, whether that be work meetings, events or even socializing with friends. Wendy (who you will hear from later) expressed to me that they were almost finished with the state required pre-adoption class work but that 6 of the 25 hours of mandated training required that they be in person. Wendy is immunocompromised and exposure to COVID-19 would have placed them at greater risk than others and that was of concern. Like Wendy, many individuals desiring to open their homes and hearts to adoption held concerns about COVID-19 and therefore experienced delays because of the mandated in-person, instruction requirement. According to the State Department of Children & Families Adoption finalizations were delayed throughout COVID-19 pandemic, many specifically due to in-person training requirements. In July 2020, this barrier impacted approximately 100 public adoption families (and as many as 200 children) awaiting adoption finalization. I know you will learn more about this from DCF in a moment.

While Wendy's barrier to accessible participation was health related, for many prospective adoptive families, the in-person requirement is also a challenge for those whose location or jobs limit their flexibility to travel. The state mandated in-person instruction often means traveling and, in many cases, means an individual must take time off from work in order to travel often significant distances. Travel time, lack of job flexibility and related expenses can and do present an additional barrier to prospective parents who have much love and care to offer and are anxious to provide a forever home to waiting children as quickly as possible.



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Fortunately, this is one of the few challenges easily solved by those like you and me who are in positions to update state law to accommodate changing times. This straightforward bill requires a simple change to allow prospective parents to still meet pre-adoptive preparation training requirements by allowing for the six hours of training previously designated in-person to have the option to be delivered face-to-face over an interactive, virtual platform. With this change, training providers will be allowed to conduct training that is still interactive, while following COVID-19 safety guidelines to the benefit of trainers and adoptive families alike.

Thank you for your time and your consideration of this bill.



TO: Chair Jacque, Vice-Chair Ballweg, and Honorable Members of the Senate
Committee on Human Services, Children, and Families

FROM: Amanda Merkwae, Legislative Advisor
Wendy Henderson, Administrator, Division of Safety and Permanence

DATE: October 14, 2021

SUBJECT: 2021 Senate Bill 294

The Department of Children and Families is committed to the goal that **all** Wisconsin children and youth are safe and loved members of thriving families and communities. In support of that goal and the desire for children to achieve permanency, DCF is testifying in favor of Senate Bill 294.

In 2020, there were 929 adoptions finalized in Wisconsin, broadly defined in three ways:

- (1) **Public adoptions**, which involves adoption from the child welfare system and made up 77% (717) of 2020 adoptions;
- (2) **Private adoptions**, which involve a non-child welfare child, are handled by a private child placing agency, and made up 21% (195) of 2020 adoptions; and
- (3) **International adoptions**, which are also handled by a private child placing agency, can be finalized either in the United States or the foreign country, and made up 1.8% (17) of 2020 adoptions.

Under current law, a prospective adoptive parent who has not previously adopted a child must complete at least 25 hours of preadoption preparation requirements— including six hours of training that is provided in person (either individually or in a group) and at least six hours of training that is appropriate to the specific needs of the child to be adopted—before the proposed adoptive parent may petition for placement of a child for adoption or bring a child into this state for adoption. Under some circumstances, a child may be placed in a home of a proposed adoptive parent prior to completion of these training requirements if that home has already been licensed as a foster home and an evaluation has been conducted to determine if the home is suitable for the child.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, a considerable number of adoption finalizations were delayed, many specifically due to the statutorily required “in-person” training requirements. SB-294 will allow prospective adoptive parents to meet the pre-adoption preparation training requirements if six hours of the training are provided either in person or face-to-face over an interactive, virtual platform. This will allow training providers to conduct trainings that are still interactive, while also following local COVID-19 safety guidelines. In the long-term, this small technical change proposed in this bill will have a tremendous impact on families that face additional barriers related to in-person training, particularly those living in rural areas. Adoption agencies and the Wisconsin Child Welfare Professional Development System (WCWPDS) also welcome this added flexibility in training modality.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this legislation.

Wendy Bolm
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Senate Committee on Human Services, Children and Families
Testimony on Senate Bill 294
October 14, 2021

Dear Chairman Jacque and members of the committee,

Thank you for allowing me to testify on behalf of SB 294/AB197 related to pre-adoption training formats. I'm grateful you're allowing virtual testimony in part because of my health, but also because Thursdays are a day I have a regularly scheduled call with the teenage girl I'm in the process of adopting, and being able to participate from Appleton ensures I'll continue to be a dependable person in the life of a child who needs stability and routine.

To put her life in a little more perspective, in less than ten years, she has been shuffled through more than twenty placements. Her social worker and support team are all in agreement that my home seems perfect for her, and that she is ready and eager to be adopted. Statistically, because she is a teen, she is more likely to age out of the system than be adopted by a loving caregiver. Every time we speak, we agree that we both hope the process moves as quickly as possible.

I contacted Representative Snodgrass early in my adoption process out of frustration. After orientation with Lutheran Social Services, filling out what seemed like endless amounts of paperwork, and taking hours of pre-pre-adoptive training, I was told to sign up for my in-person training as soon as possible because, as it was described to me, the required in-person training ran out of seats fast. I was also told that for months there had been a bottleneck of people who were waiting on the training to finish their home studies because of the confusion and delays of the early pandemic. Because of Wisconsin's high number of COVID cases, and per my doctor's recommendation due to asthma, I shuffled my in-person training reservation around for months because the COVID caseload was just too high to risk such a long, in-person training class.

The reality is that this in-person requirement slows training scheduling and is burdensome. The home study process has other in-person components that make more sense to be in-person, and are less of a burden to families; the travel required alone makes scheduling tricky. For example, for a married couple with children, both parents have to take the in-person, six hour training. Because there are limited seats and limited locations for the class, the couple might have to make the decision to either have both parents drive from Appleton to Madison to take the same class, which would necessitate finding someone willing to watch their children for ten or more hours, four hours of driving, and possibly a missed workday for both parents; or it could necessitate the parents take the class on separate


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days, which could slow down the process by a week or more. Waiting for the training to be offered in Appleton could slow the process down by months. In my training class, I met one couple who had to take the trainings out of order because of an emergency placement that had been referred to them. Because of the need and the timing of the classes offered, they were scheduled to meet the child the day after their in-person training, which was supposed to be the first class of the training series.

In order to better serve both the families who want to adopt and the children in care, we need to build more flexibility into the system so that a six hour training doesn't completely stall an intricate and complex process that has such a profound effect on the lives of our most vulnerable children.

Thank you for your time and consideration and your work in helping Wisconsin's children.

Wendy Bolm

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Wendy Bolm". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Senate Committee on Human Services, Children and Families
Testimony on SB294
October 14, 2021

Good Afternoon Chairperson Jacque, Co-Chair Ballweg and members of the Senate Committee on Human Services, Children, and Families,

I am honored to be with you today to lend my voice in support of SB 294/AB 197, which would alleviate the challenges faced by those working to become adoptive parents, by allowing the previously required hours of in-person pre-adoption training to be met through a face-to-face, interactive, virtual platform.

As an adoptive parent myself, I want to share how my personal experience of the adoption process motivated me to speak with you today. I am 68 years old. My husband and I became parents through the adoption of two sons. Our sons, Mitchell and Andrew were born in 1990 and 1993, so they are now grown men. Even so, my memories of the process may serve to strengthen your support of SB 294/AB 197.

Back then, there were no virtual options available for the training and meetings required. Living in Appleton however, we had short drives to the meetings required and most were in the evening, so they didn't conflict with our work schedules. There were couples who lived in rural areas in our group and meetings held in the winter made for some hazardous driving.

However, just before Andrew's adoption was final, we ran into a situation where even minimal travel time was a problem. The termination of parental rights hearing was approaching and we needed to meet with our social worker in the Lutheran Social Services office one last time. I was a speech/language pathologist with a start time with students of 8:30 am. Our social worker made an accommodation by scheduling our meeting for 7:30 am. Even so, I was concerned that I might return to school slightly after 8:30 am because of the travel time between the LSS office and my school. I approached my principal about the situation. Mind you, I had not needed to use any sick leave for doctor appointments for a pregnancy, as my colleagues had, but when I told him I might need to cancel my 8:30 am student, but would reschedule the student to meet with him during my scheduled prep time, he told me I would need to use a half-day of sick leave. I felt humiliated to think that there was so little regard for me as a prospective adoptive parent.

If there had been a virtual option for meeting face-to-face 28 years ago, it would have made my humiliation and work disruption unnecessary, as the travel time would have been eliminated.

Now that there are virtual options available for meeting the training requirements, it simply makes sense that we would amend our current law to make it possible. Becoming an adoptive parent is challenging enough as it is. Let's alleviate challenges where we can.

Please support SB294/AB 197. Thank you for listening. If you have any questions, I am happy to answer them.

Sincerely,
Ann Muenster
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TO: The Honorable Members of the Senate Committee on Human Services, Children and Families

FROM: Emily Coddington, Associate Director

DATE: October 14, 2021

RE: **SB 294 – Pre-adoption Training Formats**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding SB 294, which seeks to allow for live virtual training of those completing the pre-adoption training requirements. We appreciate the bill author's acknowledgement that requiring in-person attendance can be a barrier to participation and/or create unnecessary burdens to those seeking to adopt a child.

WAFCA is a statewide association that represents nearly fifty child and family serving agencies and advocates for the more than 200,000 individuals and families that they impact each year. Our members' services include foster care and adoption programs; group care for children and youth through residential care centers, group homes, and shelter care facilities; family preservation services; and behavioral health treatment. Many of our member agencies license foster homes and facilitate both public and private adoptions, so ensuring those they serve are supported is of utmost importance.

Individuals and couples interested in adoption are often overwhelmed by the application process and training requirements, both of which can be rather time-consuming and costly. Allowing training to be provided via a live videoconference session rather than requiring in-person attendance will eliminate the need for travel, thereby reducing costs and decreasing the amount of time adoptive parents have to expend in order to welcome a child into their home. SB 294 also provides an opportunity for agencies to more easily provide training, which may enable them to offer additional sessions and reach more individuals/couples. Finally, we see SB 294 as a way to increase access to working and/or already parenting individuals and couples, as well as those in rural Wisconsin communities, who may have otherwise been discouraged by the time and travel associated with in-person attendance.

As always, we appreciate the opportunity to share our thoughts with the Committee and value the ongoing commitment of the legislature to lift up issues related to adoption. We look forward to passage and enactment of this practical and technical update to Wisconsin adoption law.



October 12, 2021

Senate Committee on Human Services, Children and Families

Re: 2021 Senate Bill 294 (Relating to Pre-Adoption Training)

Dear Senator Jacque and committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the adoption training legislation before you today. I am writing to share support for SB 294.

The Coalition for Children, Youth & Families, Inc., is a non-profit organization funded in part by grants from the State of Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. We consider ourselves the single source for neutral, objective, and current information about every aspect of foster care and adoption in Wisconsin; a trusted and continuing presence through every stage of a family's foster or adoption experience.

The unique role of the Coalition for Children, Youth & Families is to

- Advocate for the most vulnerable children,
- Coach foster and adoptive families to achieve resilience, and
- Lead by balancing the needs and interests of all those touched by the foster and adoption ecosystem – children, families, agencies, caseworkers, policymakers, and others.

The Coalition for Children, Youth & Families wants to support the legislation before you today because we believe pre-adoptive training is a critical part of adoption licensing. The Coalition has a long history of providing training opportunities for foster, adoptive, and kinship families across the state of Wisconsin. This experience helps us understand and appreciate how logistically challenging providing in-person training can be, given the vastness of our state geography and the diverse work schedules of individuals and families. Over the past year, because of investments the Coalition made in providing online training alternatives, we could help alleviate the additional challenges placed on families because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This legislation will support state-required training to be offered with more flexible options, which we strongly support.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Oriana Carey, CEO
Coalition for Children, Youth & Families, Inc.

COALITION FOR CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES

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