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Governor Scott Walker
Secretary Eloise Anderson

Secretary's Office

Date: December 15, 2014

To: Legislative Council Steering Committee for Supporting Healthy Early Brain Development

From: Sara Buschman, Assistant Deputy Secretary

RE: Memo No. 1, Child Welfare and Home Visiting Provisions

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) appreciates the efforts of the Legislative Council Steering Committee for Supporting Healthy Early Brain Development in exploring topics that impact children, youth, and their families in Wisconsin.

Many of the topics discussed by the Steering Committee are consistent with the Department's goals and mission statement and several proposed initiatives have already been undertaken by the Department. Per the request of Chairwoman Ballweg, the Department is providing feedback to the committee prior to the December 15 hearing on some of the proposals outlined in Memo No. 1 regarding home visiting and child welfare. We will highlight these items below.

Home Visiting:

Expand grant coverage to the counties that have the most ACEs: Because the bulk of the funding in the Family Foundations Comprehensive Home Visiting (FFHV) Program is federal funding, we are required to follow federal requirements to conduct regular needs assessments using federally-identified measures. We recognize the importance of ACEs and can work with the federal government to determine if ACE scores can be included as one of the needs assessment measures in the future.

Home visiting evaluation: DCF is already required to follow rigorous evaluation and reporting requirements established by the federal government, as a condition of receiving the federal funding for this program. Therefore, the Department feels that state statutory language is not necessary.

Trauma-Informed Care - Training for county child welfare workers and caregivers: DCF is a strong advocate for trauma-informed care (TIC), and we provide trauma-informed care training to county child welfare workers through the Department's child welfare training. Similarly, foster parents receive TIC training through the Department's required foster parent foundation training. In addition, foster parents and county social service workers may receive TIC training in the counties and Tribes participating in the DCF Trauma Project. Therefore, the Department feels that new statutory language is not needed in this area.

Child Welfare

Two-generation framework – Explore two-generation strategies: This is consistent with the Department's goals of strengthening parents as well as children in vulnerable families.

Expand Kinship Care: Wisconsin already promotes the use of relatives as caregivers and we have some of the highest relative placement rates in the nation. DCF trains counties on the use of Family Finding to promote the use of relatives. We believe that new statutory language is not needed in this area.

Implement on-the-spot licensure and background checks for relatives: Our licensing code and state statute allow children to be placed immediately with known and trusted adults while the licensing review is pending, but we cannot conduct immediate licensure and background checks under the current agreement between the Wisconsin Department of Justice (DOJ) and the FBI. If the committee wanted to pursue this option, DOJ would need to modify its agreement with the FBI.

Evaluate the use of the CANS tool: We do not believe this proposal is necessary. CANS has already been subject to rigorous evaluations and proven to be effective.

New grounds for CHIPS order for drug positive babies: The Department feels that a CHIPS action should be based on the child's safety rather than a specific diagnosis or condition of a parent. Given the magnitude of this item, a larger conversation should take place amongst policymakers and stakeholders on the necessity of this proposal and other alternatives to addressing drug positive babies.

2013 Assembly Bill 150: DCF supports components of that legislation. Despite the positive aspects of the bill, the Department had concerns about the provisions related to post-termination contact agreements between birth parents and adoptive parents on the grounds that it may be used in a coercive way with birth parents and may place requirements on adoptive parents that are unreasonable and/or costly over time.

We hope that you find these comments helpful. We are pleased to work with the committee and thank you again for your interest and leadership in supporting healthy early brain development. While the committee's official work may be coming to a close, we look forward to continuing the discussion of these issues with members of the committee during the upcoming legislative biennium.