

Levels of Care Desk Guide – Licensed Foster Homes

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) implemented the Level of Care (LOC) initiative on January 1, 2010. Changes to the federal and state laws, along with additional factors related to placement of children in out-of-home care, contributed to the implementation of Levels of Care.

Levels of care aims to create consistency in foster home licensing statewide.

The Five Levels of Care (LOC) in Foster Care

All foster parents are given a Level of Care Certification during the foster care licensing process based on the following:

- Qualifications
- Training
- Foster parent references
- Foster parent experience



Each of the five Levels of Care Certification has a specific number of training hours, personal references, and experience requirements.

The applicant or licensee shall be involved in deciding which Level of Care Certification to pursue. Additional information regarding the certification levels pursuant to [Wis. Admin Code s. DCF 56.13](#).

All children placed in out-of-home care are assessed using the [Child and Adolescent Needs & Strengths \(CANS\) tool](#). The CANS tool assesses the child’s needs and strengths on permanence, well-being, level of functioning, and quality of life. The child’s Level of Need is also determined using the CANS tool.

A foster parent’s Level of Care certification does not need to match the child’s Level of Need. When the child’s Level of Need is higher than the providers Level of Care, agencies provide additional services and resources to support the placement.

Prioritization with Relatives/Like-Kin

- When a child cannot safely remain in their home, every effort should be made to place the child with a relative or like kin caregiver.
- **Relative and like-kin caregivers may be certified at any level of care with a child specific license.** Licensing agencies should review the expectations and benefits of each level of care certification with relative and like-kin caregivers.
- **A relative caregiver may apply for foster care license at any time.**
- **Relatives are not required to be licensed** in order to have placement of a child.



Foster Parent Training Requirements

There are three types of training that foster parents must complete in relation to their Level of Care certification: **pre-placement, initial licensing, and ongoing training**. [Wisconsin Admin. Code s. DCF 56.13](#) designates the specific training hours required for each Level of Certification, while [Wis. Admin. Code s. DCF 56.14\(5\)](#) details the requirements of pre-placement training, initial licensing, and ongoing training based on the foster's home Level of Care certification. Each foster parent must complete training requirements specific to their Level of Care certification.

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Foster Care Overview	Pre-Placement: DCF 56.13(3)(b) . 6 Hours	Pre-Placement: DCF 56.13(4)(a)1 . 6 Hours	Pre-Placement: DCF 56.13(5)(b)1 36 Hours	Pre-Placement: DCF 56.13(6)(b)1 40 Hours (4 of those hours must be child-specific)	Pre-Placement: DCF 56.13(7)(e)5 . 40 Hours (4 of which must be child or population specific)
Expectations of Foster Parents					
Caring For Children in Foster Care					
Developing and Maintaining Family Connections					
Caregiver Self Care					
Permanency	Initial Licensing: Not Required	Initial Licensing: DCF 56.13(4)(a)2 . 30 Hours (to be completed during the initial licensing period)			
Cultural Dynamics in Placement					
Child Abuse and Neglect					
Impact of Maltreatment on Child Development					
Attachment					
Separation and Placement					
Importance of Maintaining a Child's Family Connections					
Guidance and Positive Discipline					
Access to Resources					
Crisis Management					
Sexuality and Sexual Development					
Sexual Abuse					
Effects of Maltreatment and Trauma on Child Development					
Building Life Skills					
Building Birth Family and Cultural Connections					
Other topics required by licensing agency					
	Ongoing Training: Not Required	Ongoing Training: DCF 56.13(4)(a)3 . 10 hours each year of licensure beyond the initial licensing period	Ongoing Training: DCF 56.13(5)(b)3 . 18 hours each year of licensure beyond the initial licensing period	Ongoing Training: DCF 56.13(6)(b)3 . 24 hours each year of licensure beyond the initial licensing period (8 of those hours must be child or population specific)	Ongoing Training: DCF 56.13(7)(e)7 . 24 hours each year of licensure beyond the initial year of licensure (8 of those hours must be child or population specific)

* Program Staff working in a Level 5 Foster Home are required to have pre-placement training and ongoing training pursuant to [Wis. Admin. Code s. DCF 56.13\(7\)\(f\)10](#). Training provided should be specific to the child placed in the home and their needs. For homes licensed with at a level 5, agencies should reference [DCF-P5251 Level of Exceptional Treatment Foster Home Guide to Certification and Placement](#).

Certification Requirements

[Wisconsin Admin. Code Ch. DCF 56](#) establishes licensing requirements for foster homes and foster parents directed at protecting the health and safety and promoting the welfare of children placed in the homes. It also establishes the requirements for certification of a foster home for each level of care certification.

Level of Certification (LOC)	References Required	Previous Experience Required
Level 1: Child-Specific Foster Care	DCF 56.13(3) : None	DCF 56.13(3) : None
Level 2: Basic Foster Care	DCF 56.13(4)(b) : 3 favorable references from non-relatives	DCF 56.13(4) : None
Level 3: Moderate Treatment Foster Care	DCF 56.13(5)(c) 4 favorable references : 3 from non-relatives, 1 from a related adult (preferably an adult child)	<p>DCF 56.13(5)(a)1. Shall have at least 3 of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. A minimum of one year of experience as a foster parent or kinship care provider with a child placed in the applicant's home for at least one year. b. A minimum 5 years of experience working with or parenting children. c. A minimum of 500 hours of experience as a respite care provider for children under the supervision of a human services agency. d. A high school diploma or the equivalent. e. A college, vocational, technical, or advanced degree in the area of a child's treatment needs, such as nursing, medicine, social work, or psychology. f. A substantial relationship with the child to be placed through previous professional or personal experience. g. Work or personal experience for which the applicant has demonstrated the knowledge, skill, ability, and motivation to meet the needs of a child with a level of need of 3. <p>If an applicant relies on experience that meets the requirements in b. or f. as one of the 3 required criteria, the applicant shall also meet one of the criteria in a., c. e. or g.</p>
Level 4: Specialized Treatment Foster Care	DCF 56.13(6)(c) : 4 favorable references : 3 from non-relatives, 1 from a related adult (preferably an adult child if applicable)	<p>DCF 56.13(6)(a)1. Shall have at least 4 of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. A minimum of one year of experience as a foster parent or kinship care provider with a child placed in the applicant's home for at least one year. b. A minimum 5 years of experience working with or parenting children. c. A minimum of 500 hours of experience as a respite care provider for children under the supervision of a human services agency. d. A high school diploma or the equivalent. e. A college, vocational, technical, or advanced degree in the area of a child's treatment needs, such as nursing, medicine, social work, or psychology. f. A substantial relationship with the child to be placed through previous professional or personal experience. g. Work or personal experience for which the applicant has demonstrated the knowledge, skill, ability, and motivation to meet the needs of a child with a level of need of 3. <p>If an applicant relies on experience that meets the requirements in b. or f. as one of the 4 required criteria, the applicant shall also meet one of the criteria in a., c. e. or g.</p>
Level 5: Exceptional Treatment Foster Home	Refer to Level 5 Exceptional Treatment Foster Home Guide	

Agency Responsibilities

Level of Certification	Agency Contact with the Foster Parent Wis. Admin Code s. DCF 56.18	Agency Contact with the Foster Child Wis. Admin Code s. DCF 56.19	Respite Wis. Admin Code s. DCF 56.21
Level 1: Child-Specific Foster Care	DCF 56.18(1)(a) : At least once per month, and may be in person, via phone or an interactive electronic format.	DCF 56.19(1)(a) : At least 1 in person contact per month	DCF 56.21(4)(a) : Allowable but not required. Licensing agency establishes policies and procedures to fund respite care for caregivers certified at this level of care.
Level 2: Basic Foster Care	DCF 56.18(1)(a) : At least once per month, and may be in person, via phone or an interactive electronic format.	DCF 56.19(1)(a) : At least 1 in person contact per month	DCF 56.21(4)(a) : Allowable but not required. Licensing agency establishes policies and procedures to fund respite care for caregivers certified at this level of care.
Level 3: Moderate Treatment Foster Care	DCF 56.18(1)(b) : At least 2 in person contacts per month, with at least 1 being in the foster home. If a child with a LON below 3 is placed in a home with a Level 3 or 4 certification, only 1 monthly in person contact in the foster home is required. If a foster home with a Level 3-5 certification has not had placement of a child for 3 or more months, an in person contact in the foster home is required before a child is placed in the home or within 24 hours of the placement.	DCF 56.19(1)(b) : In person contact at least every other week, with at least 1 contact per month occurring in the child's foster home. If a child with a LON below 3 is placed in a home with a Level 3 or 4 certification, only 1 in person contact per month is required.	DCF 56.21(4)(b) : Licensing agency is required to fund and arrange 8-24 consecutive hours per month. NOTE: this is not required for a child with a LON below 3 who is placed in a home with a Level 3 or 4 certification.
Level 4: Specialized Treatment Foster Care	DCF 56.18(1)(b) : At least 2 in person contacts per month, with at least 1 being in the foster home. If a child with a LON below 3 is placed in a home with a Level 3 or 4 certification, only 1 monthly in person contact in the foster home is required. If a foster home with a Level 3-5 certification has not had placement of a child for 3 or more months, an in person contact in the foster home is required before a child is placed in the home or within 24 hours of the placement.	DCF 56.19(1)(b) : In person contact at least every other week, with at least 1 contact per month occurring in the child's foster home If a child with a LON below 3 is placed in a home with a Level 3 or 4 certification, only 1 in person contact per month is required.	DCF 56.21(4)(b) : Licensing agency is required to fund and arrange 8-24 consecutive hours per month. NOTE: this is not required for a child with a LON below 3 who is placed in a home with a Level 3 or 4 certification.
Level 5: Exceptional Treatment Foster Care	Refer to Level 5 Exceptional Treatment Foster Home Guide		

Foster Home Licensing – Exceptions and Waivers

A licensing agency or the DCF Exceptions Panel may grant an exception to a requirement pursuant Wis. Admin Code s. DCF 56.02(2) if it is determined that the exception will not jeopardize the health, safety, or welfare of the foster children.

A licensing agency or the DCF Exceptions Panel may grant a waiver to a non-safety-related requirement pursuant to Wis. Admin Code DCF 56.02(2)(c) for the relative of a child without an alternative provision to meet the intent of the requirement.

If an exception or waiver is granted, it must:

- Be cited on the foster care license
- Be in place only as long as the conditions under which the exception or waiver were granted remain, but no longer than 2 years from the date on which the exception or waiver was granted or the date the license terminates, whichever occurs first.

An exception or waiver may be granted to a foster care license with any level of care certification.

Community Based Environment: Keeping Children with Family in their Community Through Exceptions and Waivers

The DCF Exceptions Panel will give additional flexibility to non-safety related exception requests for relative and like-kin caregivers to support keeping children with family. Licensing agencies are encouraged to grant and submit exception requests as often as possible to support the licensing of relatives and like-kin caregivers.

Licensing agencies are also encouraged to grant “non-safety related waivers for relatives” whenever possible for any licensing requirements designated with an asterisk* in [Wis. Admin Code ch. DCF 56](#).

Exceptions

The requirement must be followed with a plan in place to meet the intent of the requirement or a plan to come into compliance with the code. A licensing agency or the DCF Exceptions Panel may impose conditions to be met within a specified period of time by the licensee as an alternative to compliance with the requirement for which an exception has been granted.

- **Licensing agencies may grant exceptions** to portions of code pursuant to Wis. Admin. Code s. [DCF 56.02\(2\)\(a\)](#); these are also noted as unboxed items in [Wis. Admin Code ch. DCF 56](#)
- **DCF Exceptions Panel may grant exceptions** to portions of code pursuant to Wis. Admin. Code s. [DCF 56.02\(2\)\(b\)](#); these are boxed items in [Wis. Admin Code ch. DCF 56](#).

Non-Safety Related Waivers

Waivers may only be granted to relative caregivers. These requirements of code do not need to be met, nor does an alternative provision to meet the intent of the requirement need to be made.

- **Licensing agencies may grant waivers** to portions of code pursuant to Wis. Admin. Code s. [DCF 56.02\(2\)\(c\)1](#); designated by (*) in [Wis. Admin Code ch. DCF 56](#)
- **DCF Exceptions Panel may grant waivers** to portions of the code pursuant to Wis. Admin. Code s. [DCF 56.02\(2\)\(c\)2](#); designated as boxed items with (*) in the [Wis. Admin Code ch. DCF 56](#).

What happens to exceptions and waivers attached to a child-specific license when the child returns home or is placed elsewhere?

When a child returns home or is placed elsewhere, the condition of a child-specific license no longer exists—the license may be kept open for up to six months or until the end of the license, whichever occurs first. After that time period, the license is no longer effective and shall close, *unless...*

- A licensee with a child-specific license meets foster care licensing requirements as a foster parent certified as a Level 2 provider without a child-specific license. *Exceptions granted may remain in effect; waivers may not.*
- This does not mean the licensee has to agree to placement of children for whom they are not related to or to whom they do not have a previously existing relationship to, but they no longer have a child-specific license since there is no identified child for the license.

Placements that do not Require Foster Care Licensor and LOC

ICPC placements in which WI is not making a Kinship Care payment and guardianship cases in which there is no order giving the Department or county “Placement and Care Responsibilities” are NOT REQUIRED to go through the foster care licensing process. In addition, relative caregivers receiving court ordered kinship care, that do not meet foster home licensing requirements, are NOT REQUIRED to go through the foster care licensing process.

Children placed under a Tribal Court-Order receiving court-ordered kinship payments are *exempt* from Foster Care licensing requirements and levels of care since DCF has no authority over other sovereign nations and cannot require a tribe to license a provider. Please refer to DCF Memo Series 2010-05: [Levels of Care Initiative- Applicability to Tribes](#)

*Tribes that license their own foster homes are not subject to Wis. Admin. Code ch. DCF 56 and license in accordance with their tribal codes and any federal standards that apply to them.

Placement Complexity Chart

Child’s Level of Need (LON)	Provider’s Level of Certification (LOC)	Placement Options		
		Foster Home	Group Home	Residential Care Center
1/2	1	Child-Specific		
	2	Basic		
3	3	Moderate Treatment	Group Home	
4	4	Specialized Treatment		
5	5	Exceptional Treatment		Residential Care Center
6	6			
	This level of care may be used in transition planning for youth who were previously placed in a higher level of care.			
	Placement of children at this level is not appropriate.			
NOTE: A child in out-of-home care can be served by a placement with a certification level (or its equivalent) lower than the child’s level of need if an exception has been granted and documented in the child’s electronic case record by the placing agency and the agency shows what services and supports will be provided to meet the child’s needs.				

Levels of Care Resources

- Wisconsin Admin. Code Ch. DCF 56: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/0131.pdf>
- Wisconsin Admin. Code Ch. DCF 56 Annotated: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/0131a.pdf>
- Levels of Care page of DCF website: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/loc>
- Level 5 Exceptional Treatment Foster Home: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/5251.pdf>
- Levels of Care Licensing Brochure: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/2644.pdf>
- Levels of Care Reference Guide: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/5610.pdf>
- Numbered and Informational Memos: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/cwportal/policy>



The Department of Children and Families is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. If you have a disability and need to access services, receive information in an alternate format, or need information translated to another language, please call the Division of Safety and Permanence at (608) 422-7000. Individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind or speech disabled can use the free Wisconsin Relay Service (WRS) – 711 to contact the department.