



Putting Families First Playbook County Boards

Overview

As elected officials with strong vested interests in their communities and constituents, county board members are critical partners in the Putting Families First child welfare transformation. This transformation is focused on keeping children and families together by supporting them in-home with resources and services, because research makes clear that families do best when they are safely together.

By partnering with county child welfare agencies and considering how they can affect systems change in their roles, county board members are helping support safe and thriving families and communities.

“Putting Families First has provided a driving force to prevent children from entering foster care. The resources the county board redirected to support this work have had an immense impact on out-of-home placements at the benefit of both families and the community. Child welfare staff are able to expand their ability to stabilize families and increase the number of children who can remain safely at home.”

- Scott Maier, Racine County Board Supervisor

How Do In-Home Investments Support Safety and Well-being?

- Separating a child from their home causes harm, no matter why that intervention needed to occur. Research makes clear that there are many benefits of serving children safely in their homes as often as resources will allow.
- Healthy caregivers lead to safe children, youth, and families. Investing in parents’ or caregivers’ wellbeing is also a benefit to their children and youth.
- As a mandated service, county human services department leaders and professionals make child safety assessments and decisions independent of other ongoing county funding decisions; however, when there are more resources available to serve children in-home, children are less likely to experience disrupted education and living arrangements or other negative outcomes.
 - By allocating resources to serve children in their current homes, child welfare agencies and county boards are reducing potential harm to the child while reducing costs associated with other expensive interventions down the line.
- County board policy and budget choices can have life-changing, generational impacts on families. County boards that support prevention are helping to end cycles of abuse, neglect, poverty and delinquency by supporting families in learning healthy skills.

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What Can County Boards Expect Around Putting Families First?

Child welfare agencies will continue to assess safety in response to abuse and neglect allegations and continue to work with youth in the youth justice (YJ) system when necessary, as required by state law. County staff and local communities will retain all decision-making authority over their systems and case decisions. Local leaders will continue to determine how to utilize their resources in their communities to meet their specific needs.

County board members may notice the following as child welfare agencies support Putting Families First:

- Increased efforts to educate community members around how they can support families.
- Requests for county board members to share their expertise on how the community can come together to support their most vulnerable residents.
- Requests for support for initiatives that support prevention and family preservation.
- A reduction in costs associated with expensive out-of-home care placements, congregate care settings or out-of-state service needs allowing for reinvestment in front-end in-home efforts.
- Reports of positive experiences from constituents, families and the workforce.
- Initial apprehension around new approaches (as people who do not understand this approach express their concerns).
- Opportunities to share their expertise as board members about why working in this way can be life-changing for local community members.



Racine County's Safety Support Program

On January 1, 2018, there were 350 children in Racine County placed in out-of-home care. This was a historically high, alarming and unsustainable number. It was then that Racine County launched its Safety Support Program with the Racine County Board-approved funding. In an effort to reduce these out-of-home placements, the Safety Support Program began using what are now known as Targeted Safety Support Funds to intensively support families in-home. With a concentrated service approach, Racine County's child welfare professionals were able to ensure child safety while keeping families together.

Racine County soon saw incredible results. On October 1, 2022 Racine County achieved an all-time low of **110 children** placed out-of-home. More and more families were being supported in-home. To strengthen these efforts, Racine County directed additional resources and funding to more effectively identify, locate and support relative placements. This has resulted in fewer children entering foster care. In fact, in 2022, **more than half of all out-of-home placements were with relatives**. These successful outcomes were achieved without any increase in child safety concerns.

The success in establishing the Safety Support Program and redirecting funding to support families and achieve these outcomes would not have been possible without the support of the Racine County Board. County board members took the initiative to understand the growth in out-of-home placements and took a brave approach in addressing the situation.

Safety will remain the priority, and removals will still occur if necessary for child safety. It is important to remember that in-home child protective services interventions are intensive services and likely feel invasive for families. While agency responses will sometimes look different (as child welfare agencies now have more resources and tools to prevent unnecessary family separation), they will also be more likely to strengthen families and reduce avoidable trauma for children in the community.



Similarly, youth justice responses will focus on diverting youth who do not need court system involvement. Responses will prioritize community-based interventions for those who require services and reserve secure placements only when needed for public safety. Putting Families First allows for productive accountability.

How Can County Boards Support Putting Families First?

Every community has unique strengths and needs, and accordingly, each community knows best how to address and respond to their own members. County boards can support the work of Putting Families First by:

- Assessing current community resource strengths and needs by connecting with local leaders about how to keep families safely together.
- Communicating with county human services department leaders about any concerns, questions or ideas on how to Put Families First.
- Recommending and finding ways to improve and invest in local services to ensure more children can be served in their communities and homes.
- Advocating for increased in-home funding and supports at the state level through local state representatives and organizations such as the Wisconsin County Board Association.
- Listening to individuals in the community with lived experience in the YJ or CPS system to learn more about their experiences and what barriers they face when it comes to community resources.



Resources

Case Flow: Access

Wisconsin's child welfare system is divided into three stages; this infographic details how a case moves through the access stage of the system.

<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/5573.pdf>

Case Flow: Initial Assessment

Wisconsin's child welfare system is divided into three stages; this infographic details how a case moves through the initial assessment stage of the system.

<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/5574.pdf>