



MEMORANDUM

TO: Honorable Members of the Assembly Committee on Children and Families

FROM: Chuck Price, Director, Waupaca County Health and Human Services Department;
President, Wisconsin County Human Service Association

Jason Witt, Director, La Crosse County Human Services Department

Katie Herrem, Executive Director, Wisconsin County Human Service Association

Sarah Diedrick-Kasdorf, Deputy Director of Government Affairs, Wisconsin Counties Association

DATE: January 17, 2018

SUBJECT: Support for Assembly Bill 785 – funding for child abuse and neglect prevention grants

The Wisconsin County Human Service Association (WCHSA) and Wisconsin Counties Association (WCA) support Assembly Bill 785, which directs the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to allocate \$500,000 of TANF funding in each fiscal year to be used for grants to counties, nonprofit organizations, or tribes to fund child abuse and neglect prevention services. Under the bill, DCF is required to award the grants with the purpose of encouraging innovative practices aimed at reducing the contact that families may have with the child welfare system and preventing the removal of children from their homes. Grant recipients are required to provide matching funds equal to 9.89 percent of the grant amount awarded (current matching amount counties must pay for community aids/children and family aids).

With the child welfare system currently operating in crisis mode, the majority of child welfare funding is allocated to back end services (e.g., funding out of home placement costs) as opposed to funding prevention and early intervention services. Numerous studies have shown the harm caused to children once a child is removed from the home. From the county perspective, our social and human services departments would love to have more funding available to prevent children and families from entering the child welfare system in the first place. Therefore, numerous counties across the state approached the Speaker's Task Force on Foster Care seeking

funding to allow child welfare staff to develop innovative programs designed to prevent a family's entry into the child welfare system.

The purpose of proposing what counties termed a "venture innovation fund" was to provide counties with access to a flexible pot of "seed money" for programs and initiatives focused on stabilizing families to prevent their entry into the child welfare system and/or foster care. Grants would have a focus on early intervention with families that present with a level of risk, but not significant safety concerns.

The funding allocated in the bill could be used to more robustly support existing programs or to launch entirely new efforts. For example, La Crosse County shared with the Speaker's Task Force its La Crosse Area Family Collaborative (LAFC) initiative. Under that partnership, La Crosse County supports neighborhood social workers who are embedded in certain high-need neighborhoods and elementary schools. These experienced social workers are given a lot of flexibility on how they can engage and build relationships with at-risk families to stabilize their situations and prevent their need for child welfare services. They work with lots of partners (e.g., neighborhood-based police officers, teachers, local churches) and have access to a flexible funding "pool" to assist families with emergency basic needs. The program has been operating for about a year and a half and it has contributed to the first significant decline in child welfare referrals that La Crosse County has experienced in many years. Other counties may use "venture innovation funds" to support initiatives such as community response or in-home safety services, or an entirely new idea.

The value of a flexible fund like this is that it would not dictate that solutions or approaches fit into a certain "box." The problem with many grant programs is that they are so narrowly focused (must address one type of addiction issue, like opioids, or promote a certain existing type of practice or approach). The "venture innovation fund" concept is meant to really leverage the creativity that exists at the county level for solutions that are tailored to meet what may be unique needs.

Therefore, WCA and WCHSA respectfully request your support for Assembly Bill 785.

Thank you for considering our comments.