



**TO:** Assembly Committee on Children & Families  
**FROM:** Susanna Leggio, Director, Child Welfare, Children's Wisconsin  
**DATE:** Wednesday, November 1, 2023  
**RE:** Support for AB 557 – Inclusion of like-kin as an option for with whom children may be placed out of their home under certain circumstances

Chair Snyder and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share testimony with you today. I'm writing to share Children's Wisconsin's (Children's) strong support for this bipartisan legislation. On behalf of Children's, I'd like to thank the bill authors, Representative Snyder and Senators Ballweg and James, along with members of the committee who have cosponsored this proposal.

Children's is the region's only independent health care system dedicated solely to the health and well-being of kids. As such, we offer a wide array of programs and services inside our hospital and clinic walls and out in our communities. Between our hospitals in Milwaukee and Neenah, primary, specialty and urgent care clinics and community services offices across the state – we provide kids and their families with care and services they need to promote health, safety and well-being.

While today my comments will center on care and services we provide to children in out-of-home care, I do want the committee to know that Children's also offers several upstream, prevention-focused programs and services across the state to help support parents, caregivers, professionals and our communities with education and resources. As you may know, Children's is the largest not-for-profit, community-based agency serving children and families in the state, providing community services to approximately 15,000 children and families annually with more than a dozen locations across Wisconsin. Children's provides home visiting services across the state to support at-risk parents, during a pregnancy through the first five years of the child's life, to reduce the likelihood of child maltreatment and to strengthen family functioning.

In partnership with the Division of Milwaukee Child Protective Services, Children's is responsible for the ongoing case management of approximately half of the youth and families involved in out-of-home care in Milwaukee County. We also recruit, license and support foster and adoptive parents, as well as match and place children in safe, loving homes. Our priority is to do everything we can to provide resources and supports to ensure children remain safely with their family. As you know, foster parents or kinship caregivers provide a temporary home for children until they can be safely reunited with biological family or reach another form of permanency, such as adoption or guardianship. Children's goal is to ensure that at least 45% of youth in out-of-home care are placed with either a relative or like-kin caregiver. AB 557 would expand the definition of 'kinship care relative' in Wisconsin to include "like-kin" individuals who have a significant emotional relationship to a child or family. Expanding this definition will help place children with individuals who they already know and who love and care for them – including close family friends, a godparent or other caregiver with whom the child has a close emotional bond.

Placement with like-kin relatives can help maintain the child's connection to their family, school and community, reducing the emotional strain on the child. These close relations often know the children's personalities, behaviors, preferences and routines and can help the child keep a strong connection with their parent and siblings, which can reduce the disruption and trauma a child may experience. Knowing a like-kin relative is caring for their children can help the parent progress more quickly towards reunification goals.

This legislation will help like-kin caregivers like Ms. H. She and her biological sister were separated as children and Ms. H was adopted which severed the legal relationship between them. As such, she was not recognized

as a legal relative when her biological sister's four children, ages 1 – 11, needed an out-of-home placement. Because she was viewed as a non-relative caregiver, she had to quickly become licensed and complete extensive paperwork, meet with licensing workers, complete interviews, background checks and home visits to comply with state requirements outlined in DCF 56. She immediately jumped into this process while simultaneously ensuring all of the children's needs were met by providing clothing and hygiene products, taking them to doctor's appointments, transporting them to school and daycare and supporting visits with their parents and case manager. If the licensing requirements were not met, the court ordered that a new placement would need to be found. Because Ms. H was a non-relative caregiver, during this 60-day period before Ms. H became licensed, she was financially responsible for the expenses to care for the children. Children's supported her with gift cards for food and basic needs, and her family helped when they could, however she struggled financially to accommodate the placement. Recognizing caregivers like Ms. H as like-kin will remove the timely licensing requirements and enable them to receive financial support. This change will allow caregivers to focus on the children and meeting their needs and not worry about losing placement of the children.

As you may know, shortages of kinship caregivers and foster parents puts a strain on the limited placement resources within the child welfare system. Expanding the definition to include "like-kin" will support enhanced placement options for children in out-of-home care. In addition to increasing the number of children and youth placed with a relative or like-kin caregiver, it will better position child-placing agencies to keep siblings together, increase permanency options for children and youth and reduce our reliance on congregate care settings. Additionally, it will enable like-kin caregivers who are willing to care for these children to be eligible to receive the financial support that kinship caregivers typically receive to support them in caring for the child. Removing the financial barriers to caring for children in their lives will help support more positive outcomes for the children and their families. From our experience with kinship caregivers today, children in care often experience greater placement stability and face fewer behavioral challenges when placed with people they know. The same standards remain for assessing like-kin caregivers as a safe, appropriate and best placement option for the child. Expanding this definition will support more out-of-home care options for kids in Wisconsin.

Thank you for the opportunity to share Children's Wisconsin's support for this important legislation that would have profound impact on kids in out-of-home care with improved placement options and support for those like-kin caregivers who step in during a time of critical need. We encourage your support of this legislation and our team is happy to answer any questions you may have through our contact information below.

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*Children's Wisconsin (Children's) serves children and families in every county across the state. We have inpatient hospitals in Milwaukee and the Fox Valley. We care for every part of a child's health, from critical care at one of our hospitals, to routine checkups in our primary care clinics. Children's also provides specialty care, urgent care, emergency care, dental care, school health nurses, foster care and adoption services, family resource centers, child health advocacy, health education, family preservation and support, mental health services, pediatric medical research and the statewide poison hotline.*