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Wisconsin Takes Steps to Support Former Foster Youth
Study Shows Youth Still Face Barriers When Compared with Peers

At a Congressional briefing in Washington, DC today, researchers released new data on the life outcomes of former foster youth in Wisconsin and other Midwest states. Their research identifies possible public policy changes that could improve the lives of former foster youth, while noting significant differences between their young adult lives and young adults in the general population.

This new data compiled by the Chapin Hall Center on Children at the University of Chicago comes at a time when Wisconsin is placing a renewed focus on the needs of foster youth and the state's responsibility to provide for their ongoing care beyond age 18. The recently enacted state budget included a significant enhancement in the state's support for former foster youth by extending Medical Assistance coverage for youth until the age of 21. The extension of health care coverage for former foster youth was one component of the Governor's major health care reform proposal, BadgerCare Plus, which will expand access for a number of uninsured populations in the state.

"The enactment of BadgerCare Plus was a tremendous step forward in Wisconsin's policies regarding former foster youth," emphasized Linda A. Hall, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Association of Family and Children's Agencies (WAFCA). "Youth who leave care at the age of 18 face numerous challenges such as finding and maintaining a good paying job and affordable housing, continuing their education, and establishing meaningful supportive relationships in the community. By extending health care coverage for these young people, the state has removed a barrier that can keep youth from achieving stability and success in other areas of their lives."

Hall and WAFCA member agencies have formed a workgroup that focuses on improving services and public policies to better address the service needs of youth, such as foster youth, as they "age out" of human services systems of care. The extension of health care coverage for former foster youth has been a major policy change advocated by WAFCA since 2000, when the federal government first allowed states to enact the extension.

The Chapin Hall *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth* (Midwest study) provides a picture of the lives of former foster youth relative to their peers and includes former foster youth from Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin.

"The fact that this research includes our own Wisconsin youth is of real value to those of us who continue to advocate for policy changes to better serve these young people," stated Hall. "We know that compared to their peers our Wisconsin foster youth are more likely to land in prison, less likely to complete their high school education, more likely to become pregnant, less likely to be gainfully employed, and more likely to need government services such as food stamps."

Among the most striking elements of the Midwest study, are observations regarding the relative educational achievement of foster youth in Wisconsin and Iowa compared to Illinois. Illinois is one of only a few states that currently permits youth to remain in foster care until they turn 21. With regard to higher education, the Midwest study found that youth remaining in state care until age 21 were three-and-a-half times more likely to attend college and more than twice as likely to complete at least one year of college than those who left care at age 18.

“WAFCA is committed to working with Wisconsin policy makers to take the next step for these youth and provide them the option to remain in foster care to age 21. The Midwest study provides important evidence that extending care can improve the life outcomes for these young people,” Hall observed. The state of Iowa recently enacted a new program that provides extended care for Iowa foster youth and there is movement in other states and on the national level in that direction.

“While the study focuses on many of the deficits experienced by former foster youth, our WAFCA member agencies see every day the tremendous potential and the resiliency of these young people,” Hall concluded. “With the right supports, these young people are capable of great things. Just like each of our own children, they simply are not ready to launch into the world on their own at age 18. The work Wisconsin has done to promote higher education scholarships for these foster youth and the extension of MA coverage until age 21 are important advancements. It is our hope that with data like that provided in the Midwest study, Wisconsin will take the critical next steps to truly enhance the lives of the foster youth under our care.”

Copies of the Chapin Hall study, *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth*, may be accessed by visiting: www.chapinhall.org.

For more information on BadgerCare Plus visit: <http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/badgercareplus/index.htm>

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For over 25 years, the Wisconsin Association of Family & Children’s Agencies (WAFCA) has represented private agencies that provide mental health, child welfare, education and support services to families and children throughout the state of Wisconsin. WAFCA promotes effective and accountable human services programs, working with state and local government to enhance the quality of life for families and children, especially those in crisis.