

CONNECTIONS COUNT PREVENTION INITIATIVE

Issue:

- Nationally and in Wisconsin, young children aged 0-5 account for the largest proportion of children involved in the child welfare system due to maltreatment in their home. Abuse, neglect or other traumatic experiences during a child's first five years impairs the healthy development of a child's brain during a critical period, resulting in both short-term and lifelong negative physical health, social, emotional, and behavioral consequences.
- Vulnerable families with young children who are at risk of experiencing abuse or neglect have a range of needs that could be addressed but are not using or aware of supports in their communities that could assist them.

Underlying Principle:

- Evidence confirms that connectedness to other adults is a protective and supportive factor that builds resilience, helps individuals who have experienced trauma heal, and helps prevent parents from exposing their children to abuse and neglect.

Framework of the Initiative:

- The Connections Count initiative is supported by the Fostering Futures initiative, a public private collaboration, supported by Wisconsin First Lady Tonette Walker, to promote the integration of trauma-informed practices in all systems affecting children and families, leading to the long-term goal of improving health and socio-economic outcomes for families and children in Wisconsin. A cross-system workgroup composed of staff from the Departments of Children and Family, Corrections, Public Instruction, Health Services and the Children's Court Improvement Project supported the Fostering Futures initiative in the development of the Connections Count proposal.
- Under the Connections Count program, trusted members of the community would serve as "community connectors", reaching out and seeking to engage with vulnerable families with children aged 0-5 in the community. A trusted neighbor or community leader is in a unique position, because of his or her knowledge of the neighborhoods and families, to identify and encourage families to take advantage of community resources or opportunities they may need or desire.
- In collaboration with the family, the connector identifies a family's needs and "connects" the family with formal and informal supports in the community to help meet those needs. A key goal of the initiative is to connect families and individuals to neighborhood-based and informal groups and organizations that can be permanent, ongoing supports.
- To build a trusting relationship, it is expected that the community connector visits the family a number of times at the outset. The community connector also carries out a number of follow-up visits to learn whether the family has developed helpful and meaningful community connection(s); to provide further assistance, if needed and desired by the family; and to learn about barriers the family experienced in connecting with any

of the organizations or groups so as to facilitate system change with those organizations to eliminate the barriers. The connector does not provide case management or direct services to the family.

- The community connectors would be housed in an organization experienced with community outreach that contracts with the state to provide the connector service.
- The connector would be a para-professional position because a para-professional is more likely to be seen as an authentic, grass roots member of the community and therefore more likely to secure the trust of participants. The connectors would receive robust support from their home organization, including include supervision, mentoring, coaching, peer support, and targeted training in areas such as family engagement, trauma informed principles, and developmentally appropriate practices.

Evidence-Base

- A number of programs are in place in Wisconsin and other states with similar characteristics and goals of engaging parents through grass-roots outreach and identifying and connecting families to services, including the Navigator community health worker program in Milwaukee administered by Children's Hospital of Wisconsin. National research has shown the community health worker model, which is similar to the Connections Count approach, to be an evidence-based effective model.

Funding and Implementation

- The Governor's budget provides \$72,800 TANF funding in FY16 and \$457,400 TANF funding in FY17 and 1 position beginning in FY16 to support the Connections Count initiative. The first year would be used for planning and preparation, including conducting the request for proposal or other site selection process. In the second year of the program, the program is projected to be implemented in three sites covering 1,000 families.