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Issue Brief

Helping Foster Kids Succeed

Dr. Hilary Shager was one of four speakers at the 33rd Wisconsin Family Impact Seminar on *Helping Foster Kids Succeed: State Strategies for Saving Lives, Saving Money*. She is the Associate Director of the Robert M. La Follette School of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She previously served as a research analyst with the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families where she designed and evaluated programs on child support, child welfare, and early care and education. This issue brief summarizes her seminar presentation.

Dr. Shager's presentation can be downloaded at wisfamilyimpact.org/fis33. Her presentation was based on a chapter in the seminar briefing report written by the WI Department of Children and Families. The chapter also can be downloaded from the link above.

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The Child Welfare System and Foster Care in Wisconsin

How many children and youth are in foster care in Wisconsin? In 2013, 6,516 Wisconsin children and youth were placed in out-of-home care because they were exposed to abuse, neglect, or adverse experiences in their own families. These children were among the 27,037 cases investigated by Wisconsin's child welfare system that year. The majority of substantiated allegations (59%) involved neglect. Of the children eventually placed in out-of-home care, about one third were aged 0-4 years old and about one third were 11-16. The majority of children in out-of-home care are Caucasian, but that varies from county to county.

In what settings are children placed? The goal of Wisconsin's child welfare system is to safely maintain children in their own home, family, and community. In that spirit, about one third (34%) of children were placed with relatives in 2013 and two thirds were placed with non-relatives. Of the 6,516 children in out-of-home care, 47% were placed in foster homes, 14% in court-ordered kinship care, and 14% in treatment foster homes. About 1 in 10 live in a group home or residential care center.

How much time do youth spend in foster care? When it is necessary to place children in out-of-home care, a court-approved permanency plan is created to transition each child to a safe, permanent, and nurturing setting as quickly as possible. In 2013, the median length of stay in out-of-home care for all Wisconsin children was 11.5 months and the average number of placements was 2.5. Looking at older kids aged 17-19, the median length of stay was 22.3 months with an average of 4.8 placements.

Do most youth successfully reunify with their birth family? The majority of children (60%) reunify with their families. One challenge in Wisconsin is that 20% of children who reunified with their birth families ended up reentering the foster care system within 12 months. This rate is higher than other states and double the federal benchmark of 9.9%. To reduce the reentry rate and improve outcomes for children and families, the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families initiated a Post-Reunification Support Program in 2014 that provides at-risk families with 12 months of services.

How many youth leave the foster care system without a permanent placement? In 2013, 377 foster youth in Wisconsin "aged out" of foster care without achieving a permanent placement. Youth who age out face many challenges—lower rates of graduation and postsecondary education, higher rates of unemployment and homelessness, and higher odds of incarceration. In Wisconsin, youth generally "age out" at age 18 with a couple exceptions. Youth can stay in foster care until age 19 if they are expected to graduate by that age, and until age 21 if they are in high school full-time and have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). An IEP specifies how the child's disability affects performance in the regular curriculum and identifies measurable annual goals for making academic progress.

How is Wisconsin's child welfare system organized? The child welfare system in Wisconsin is state-supervised and county-administered. The exception is Milwaukee County, where the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare (BMCW) at the Department of Children and Families oversees child welfare. Whether administered by the county or state, the approach of the child welfare system is to apply trauma-informed principles to help children heal from the trauma they have experienced and avoid exposing them to further trauma. Foster parent training is mandated by federal law and state statute in Wisconsin. ●