

Families Can't Wait!

Ending Waiting Lists

Families and Programs Working Together

Wisconsin's successful Family Support Program serves more than two thousand families and provides a lifeline for many parents and children. However, the number of families waiting for services is now greater than the number actually served.

This lack of funding forces families to make difficult choices and, at times, place children in foster care or institutions. Funding increases for Family Support programs have proven to reduce out-of-home placements for children as well as reduce costs and burdens on families. A fully funded program also helps to provide a loving home environment that allows families to nurture a child's development and simply be a family.

The key to convincing policy makers to fully-fund Family Support is by programs and parents combining forces. Listed below are ideas on how Family Support programs and families can work together in their communities to end waiting lists. Many of the ideas come directly from program leaders and parents themselves. Consider what you can do together to create a better future for families!

Impacting State Government

- Encourage one-on-one meetings with legislators to share personal stories from a program or family perspective.
- Arrange for you're your Family Support Advisory Committee to meet with a local legislator. Consider having coffee at a local café.
- Encourage families to bring children along on legislative visits.
- Ask the Family Support Advisory Committee to send letters to local legislators, informing them of the county's funding status.
- Arrange for parent support groups and other school groups to meet with representatives at a school to discuss issues.
- Consider requesting a DAWN grant to draft a letter to legislators. Supply materials and postage to families throughout the county.
- Learn about any legislative forums conducted during campaign season. Invite all Family Support participants to share their views.
- Consider hosting a legislative breakfast.
- Invite legislators to Family Support meetings.

- Encourage families to sign up for the DAWN e-mail network.
- Monitor the legislative hearing calendar through DAWN. Encourage families and professionals to testify.
- Train parents on how to contact legislators and share their personal stories.
- Arrange for a bus to take families and program leaders to Madison for legislator meetings.
- Send letters to legislators telling them about the important work your Family Support program is doing.

Wisconsin Family Support Facts

- The number of children waiting for services in Wisconsin has increased every year since 1989.
- The average amount of support families receive is \$1600/year.
- Out-of-home placement currently costs about \$51,081 per child for foster care and \$99,600 per child for an institution.
- 56% of Wisconsin families report financial hardship in meeting the care of their child with special needs.
- 54% of parents have stopped working or reduced hours in order to care for their child.

Impacting County Government

- Encourage one family a quarter to share their family story with county board members via a letter.
- Arrange for a family on the waiting list to address the county board.
- Educate the county's council on Long Term Care about the Family Support program.
- Set up a simple refreshment and issue table prior to a board meeting. Ask families to attend.

- Arrange for county board members or legislators to meet with parents during a Birth to 3 play group.
 - Arrange for families to meet with or have coffee with county program administrators to learn more about Family Support.
 - Register families to vote at a Family Support potluck picnic or other gathering.
 - Join and participate in your county People Can't Wait coalition.
 - Join your local Family Support Advisory Committee.
 - Invite political leaders to the Family Support center and introduce them to family members.
- Encourage families to think in advance of questions and issues they want to address.

Educating & Empowering Families

- Include simple information on advocacy and suggestions on how to contact your legislator when sending eligibility letters to families.
- Conduct leadership trainings for parents. Provide materials on advocacy, issues and policy-making.
- Invite speakers from the Wisconsin Council on Developmental Disabilities to discuss advocacy during a family potluck or support group.
- Host a meeting to inform parents of the Family Support funding situation in the county.
- Create a monthly advocacy newsletter for families.
- Facilitate family support groups and encourage parent mentoring.
- Inform families about their rights regarding Family Support.
- Encourage families to sign up for the DAWN e-mail network.
- Help families access statewide training opportunities regarding advocacy.
- Ask families for input on what families need and want from the program.
- Support parent leaders by hosting meetings at convenient times and locations. Consider providing child care or respite assistance.
- Work to solicit input from ALL families in the program.
- Contact parents when county or state policy is proposed. Ask them
- Share information with families on the county People Can't Wait coalition.
- Provide families with phone numbers, e-mail and addresses of legislators and other advocates.

- Offer space and materials for families who want to convene meetings about issues in the community.

Creating Awareness

- Help families learn how to tell their family stories to the media and others. (Show videos, share materials.)
- Encourage families to write letters to the editor about current Family Support issues.
- Invite local reporters to talk to parents about media relations.
- Consider participating in local parades or festivals – share People Can't Wait information.
- Contact local media (newspaper, television, radio) whenever the county board or state government is making a decision regarding funding for families.
- Wear buttons (with your child's picture), t-shirts, pass out stickers, use banners, etc. to share the "People Can't Wait" message.
- Request public awareness materials from the Wisconsin Council on Developmental Disabilities.
- Use hard facts with the media and the public – share the \$ numbers on in-home verses out-of-home placement costs and the number of families on the waiting list.
- Ask your local church to print a short story about your family and the Family Support program in the bulletin.
- Consider contacting the smaller and ethnic newspapers in your area to reach a broader audience. Share your family story and the costs related to Family Support.
- Ask the mayor or county board to designate a "Disability Awareness Week." Publicize with flyers, in local papers, at schools. Share information on Family Support through a press release.
- Consider organizing a disability awareness "fair" at a local school with activities, games and information. Host an issue and voter registration table.
- Always carry a picture of your child and be prepared to share your story!

For More Information:

DAWN: www.dawninfo.org
(legislative updates, issue briefings)

The Family Action Network:
hecht@waisman.wisc.edu

Legislative Hotline: (800) 362-9472
<http://www.legis.state.wi.us/waml/>
(find your legislator and other state government information)

Sources for this document include: Essential Allies: Families as Advisors, Elizabeth Jeppson and Josie Thomas: Family Support Centers: A Program Manager's Toolkit, Family Support America: A System of Long-Term Support for Wisconsin Children with Disabilities and Their Families;

Why Support Families? Liz Hecht; The National Center for Family Support.