



## Keys to Prevention: Wisconsin Explores Housing Interventions to Keep Children with Their Families

The eviction moratorium during the COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant decline in safety reports and family separations in the State of Wisconsin. This phenomenon prompted child welfare leaders to explore housing assistance as a means of reducing unnecessary and traumatic removals. Accenture's **Molly Tierney** spoke with Wisconsin's state child welfare director, **Wendy Henderson**, about the innovative work underway.

**Molly Tierney: First, what is your point of view on child welfare as primary prevention?**

**Wendy Henderson:** Other social services agencies are better suited to delivering primary prevention. Child welfare should provide secondary prevention. Too often, though, child welfare removes children from their homes because their families are in poverty. In Wisconsin, we are focusing on making sure the system involves the “right” families—those that come to us truly because of an allegation of abuse and/or neglect. We want to keep the “wrong” families—the ones who are simply struggling with poverty—out of the system.

**Tierney: What guided your thinking about where it might be possible to divert the “wrong” kids from secondary prevention?**

**Henderson:** We always start with data, and a couple of powerful data points kicked off our thinking. First, we analyzed what we call our “short stayers,” the kids we remove from their families for 30 days or fewer. On



paper, that is a short separation, but it changes that child and family forever. The damage is difficult or impossible to undo.

Second, we looked closely at the overlay of poverty and child welfare. In Wisconsin, as in many places, there is a straight line between poverty, race, and child welfare. They are just inextricably intertwined.

We started to ask, “What can we grab hold of?” That is when housing came to the front. It became even clearer as we looked at the relationship between the COVID-19 eviction moratorium and the reduction in removals based on housing.

We challenged ourselves to find new ways to work with families who should not be in the child welfare system. At the same time, we are revising our safety model since that is the mechanism for starting the process.

**Tierney: How are you starting to bring this idea to life?**

**Henderson:** It is still early days, but we are calling the initiative “Family Keys” and developing it in partnership with Casey Family Programs. Wisconsin already has a federally funded program that provides more

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unrestricted funding to help families involved in child welfare keep their kids at home, but it is time limited to four months. We started with that and found some ancillary support. Counties were looking for a longer time window to intervene in families where housing is an issue. Since housing is local, we are asking our counties to decide how the program should look in their areas.

**Tierney: Parents who have worked hard for secure housing might look at this and say, “So, you come into child welfare and get an apartment?” How are you handling that potential issue?**

**Henderson:** For now, we are just setting it aside. We had already been working on a housing program for adolescents aging out of foster care. We have been seeing how stable housing helps them shift from “Where am I sleeping tonight?” to “What does my future look like?” Often there is concern

that if you start paying someone’s rent, they will be unhoused again as soon as you stop. That is not what is happening with these former foster youth.

Imagine how the same could be true of families. If we could remove housing stress for 12 or 18 months, what might happen to these families? How might they tap into some of their other protective factors and resiliency they are currently spending on “Where are we sleeping tonight?”

**Tierney: How will you measure results?**

**Henderson:** Each county is tailoring the program to meet their community’s needs. While this makes it a bit more difficult to have a consistent measure across the program, it provides us with a unique opportunity to have a more diverse experiment and learn from each other in a shorter amount of time.

Some of the things we will be monitoring while families are enrolled in

the program include whether the child(ren) remained in the home, additional child welfare and/or social services involvement, family and child well-being, including stress and mental health, employment, and more.

If Family Keys is a success and we want to scale, it would require significant funding. But if the child welfare system routinely pays thousands of dollars per month per child to stay in a group home, why shouldn’t we be equally willing to invest \$1,000 a month to help an entire family be safer, more secure, and more stable together? 📌

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