



MEMORANDUM

TO: Members of the Joint Committee on Finance
FROM: Chris Reader, IRG Action Fund
DATE: May 20, 2025
RE: Adopt Pro-Family Child Welfare Reforms in State Budget

Wisconsin's child welfare system is in urgent need of modernization to better serve children, families, and foster caregivers across our state. The *Building Brighter Futures: Reforming Child Welfare in Wisconsin* report—released earlier this year by the Institute for Reforming Government (IRG)—charts a clear, pro-family path forward. It is a roadmap rooted in dignity, accountability, and the fundamental belief that every child deserves a stable, permanent home.

As you prepare to vote on the Department of Children and Families (DCF) budget, **IRG Action Fund urges the Joint Committee on Finance to adopt key provisions of the report. The provisions already have support from Gov. Evers and were included in Governor Evers' DCF state budget proposal—specifically:**

- **Removing parent debt as an arbitrary barrier to permanence**
- **Protecting Social Security benefits as the private property of foster youth**

These are smart, targeted reforms that will protect children's futures while restoring trust in the system—and they enjoy support across the political spectrum.

Why Now?

Wisconsin's child welfare system too often keeps children in limbo, undermines due process, and imposes inconsistent practices across counties. But in a time of divided government, **this is exactly the kind of issue where bipartisan progress is both possible and necessary.**

Governor Evers' DCF budget proposal included two critical, pro-family reforms from the IRG report:

1. **Removing parent debt as an arbitrary barrier to permanence.** When children enter the system, their parents are required to pay the state to cover the cost of care for their child. When it is decided that the parent can retake custody of their child, the state can withhold custody if the parent is not current on their payments. **Debt should not keep children from their parents.** (within LFB Summary of Governor's Budget Recommendations Page 109, #36)
2. **Protecting Social Security benefits as the private property of foster youth.** Roughly 10% of children in out-of-home care are entitled to federal Social Security payments.



These funds are the personal property of the children in the foster care system, yet most of the money is taken by the state and counties to fund the cost of care. **The money should be placed in escrow for future use by the child, not taken by government.** That account could then assist them when they age out of care, setting them up for success in adulthood. (within LFB Summary of Governor's Budget Recommendations Page 120, #11)

The Joint Committee on Finance has a unique opportunity to move these bipartisan provisions forward. Doing so would show that, even in a polarized climate, Wisconsin leaders can unite around common-sense solutions that protect the most vulnerable among us.

A Bipartisan Opportunity

IRG Action Fund encourages the Joint Committee on Finance to adopt these reforms as part of the DCF budget. The provisions are modest in scope but powerful in impact. They will improve outcomes for children, uphold rights, and build public confidence in a system too often seen as opaque or unfair.



IRG Full Report:

<https://reforminggovernment.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Reforming-Child-Welfare-in-Wisconsin.pdf>



IRG Press Release on the report:

[Transforming Futures: New Report Charts a Pro-Family Path](#)

Sincerely,

Chris Reader
IRG Action Fund