

2015 RES- 314

OPPOSING LEGISLATION THAT EXPANDS LAW ENFORCEMENT ROLE IN CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT (SUCH AS SB 326/AB 429) AND CHANGES DEFINITION OF CHILD NEGLECT (SB 324/AB 431), WHICH COULD ENHANCE RACIAL INEQUITIES

Growing up in a safe and supportive environment is critical for children and adolescents to thrive. Child-serving programs and systems must implement proven interventions that focus on positive development and building lifelong family strength rather than criminalization. Dane County is committed to strengthening families by addressing upstream issues that include eliminating racial inequities within the criminal justice system, fostering economic development, and supporting early childhood education, as well as removing other barriers to success.

The Wisconsin Attorney General has introduced a package of bills to create “Justice for Children” within the child abuse and neglect arena. SB 324/AB 431 increase penalties and expand the definition of neglect to include: necessary care which covers appropriate food, clothing, medical care, dental care, shelter, supervision; opportunity for education; and protection from exposure to drugs. These changes seem to target the low-income community and will have a disparate outcome on marginalized communities.

SB 326/AB 429 requires county Child Protective Services (CPS) to report all child abuse or neglect cases to the sheriff or police department, along with coordination of the investigation of those cases, and referral of those cases to the district attorney for criminal prosecution. The impacts include creating a fast track to the criminal justice system; discouraging responsible parties from reporting; criminalizing poverty; violating confidentiality because reporting information will be made public by law enforcement; and increased racial disparity within the criminal justice system.

According to Dane County Human Services, in Dane County, an African-American parent is at least 7 times more likely to be referred to CPS versus a white parent. A Hispanic parent is at least twice as likely to be referred to CPS versus a white parent. The neighborhoods that receive the most referrals are our neighborhoods with the highest concentrations of poverty.

Justice for children should include living in safe neighborhoods, increased access to education and health care, and positive family support. The bills run contrary to Trauma Informed Practices recommended by a statewide Child Welfare Conference and promoted by First Lady Tonette Walker. Dane County supports keeping children safe utilizing proven programs and services to increase the success of all of our children.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Dane County Board of Supervisors opposes these bills proposing controversial changes to child abuse and neglect laws, as well as any legislation that thwarts racial equity.

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that copies of this resolution will be sent to Governor Scott Walker, First Lady Tonette Walker, Eloise Anderson, Secretary, Department of Children & Families, and to the members of the Dane County Legislative Delegation.