To Learn More About Foster Care in Wisconsin, Check Out These Websites:

- **Wisconsin Department of Children and Families Website:** https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/fostercare/become
- **National foster youth organization:** www.fosterclub.com

Ask your caseworker to give you the names and phone numbers of the following:

Caseworker or Social Worker	
Name	
Phone Number	
Email	
Address	
Emergency Contact Phone Number	
Caseworker or Social Worker's Supervisor	
Name	
Phone Number	
Email	
Address	
Emergency Contact Phone Number	
Agency Director	
Name	
Phone #	
Email	
Attorney or GAL	
Name	
Phone Number	
Email	
Address	
Emergency Contact Number	
Counselor or Emergency Contact	
Name	
Phone Number	
Email	
Address	
Foster Parent	
Phone Number	
Emergency Contact Phone Number	

DCF is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. If you have a disability and need to access this information in an alternate format, or need it translated to another language, please contact (608) 266-8787. For civil rights questions call (608) 422-6889 or 711 TTY (Toll Free).

Handbook for Youth in Foster Care

WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

About the Handbook

This guide is meant to help you better understand foster care and what you can expect while you are in foster care, however, there may be exceptions to some topics due to special circumstances.

This is a handbook for youth placed in foster care in Wisconsin. Youth placed away from their families by courts have the same wants, needs, and hopes for the future that all youth have. If you are a youth in foster care, you can expect to have not only safety and protection, but also assistance in many aspects of your life, which will be explained here.

The guide will also provide you with tips on how to advocate for yourself so that you can get what you need and achieve your goals for the future. As a youth in care, **you** are your own best advocate. It is up to you to make sure that your voice is heard. Being in out-of-home care can be very frustrating, but you cannot give up. The 2010 and 2011 Foster Youth Advisory Council, made up of current and former foster youth helped put this guide together so that you can be educated and be *heard*. The mission of the Wisconsin Youth Advisory Council is to inspire change by providing education, advocacy, support, training and awareness to governmental systems and the general public to better the image of foster youth by addressing the issues of current and former foster youth in Wisconsin.

When you see the word "**agency**," this means your local human service agency, and when you see the word "**caseworker**," it means the agency's caseworker or social worker who will be working with you.

You Have a Right to Make a Complaint:

- You can make grievance (a complaint) to the agency about the care you are receiving.
- Remember to speak with your caseworker first, and if this does not resolve your complaint, follow the list below.
- Each child welfare agency is required to have a complaint process. Please go to the DCF website to find the contact person for your county for the complaint process: http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/.

 # 1 CASEWORKER (Always start with your caseworker)

If you don't feel that your complaint was resolved, you can talk to:

↓

#2 YOUR CASEWORKER'S SUPERVISOR

If you don't feel that your complaint was resolved, you can talk to:

↓

#3 AGENCY MANAGER/DIRECTOR

If you don't feel that your complaint was resolved, you can talk to:

↓

#4 DCF REGIONAL ADMINISTRATOR

*****If you do not feel comfortable talking with these people, you can always ask your lawyer for help in filing a grievance.*****

"Never, never, never, never ever give up!"

-Winston Churchill

How do I Advocate for Myself?

As you advocate for yourself, here are a few helpful hints.

- **DO** know that you have a right to ask for help!
- **DO** ask for help from an adult that you trust, such as your counselor, a teacher, your foster parent, or a friend.
- **DO** know that you have a voice in decisions made about you even though it does not always seem like it. Speak up!
- **DO** be clear about what's happening, what you need, and how you feel.
- **DO** brainstorm different solutions and backup plans.
- **DO** be straightforward.
- **DO** be ready to negotiate.

- **DON'T** think that you don't have a voice.
- **DON'T** hesitate to ask for help.
- **DON'T** feel like you are bothering people.
- **DON'T** think that you have to go through this by yourself.
- **DON'T** think that it's too late.
- **DON'T** start without thinking things through.
- **DON'T** use sarcasm, degrading language, swear, or call people names.
- **DON'T** prejudge others.
- **DON'T** GIVE UP!

"Speak your mind even if your voice shakes."
-Maggie Kuhn

What is Foster Care?

The temporary removal and placement of youth outside of their family's home.

Why Am I in Foster Care?

Always remember that being in foster care is **not your fault**!
Youth are in foster care for many different reasons. Some reasons are:

- ❑ Parent(s)/caregivers were not able to keep the youth safe and cared for.
- ❑ Family crisis or conflicts between the youth and parent(s)/caregiver(s) or siblings.
- ❑ Physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, or neglect.
- ❑ Parent(s)/caregivers voluntarily place youth in foster care as they may not be able to meet their youth's needs.
- ❑ A judge decides that a youth needs to be placed in foster care to give a family time to make the changes needed for a youth's safe return home.

What can I expect from the Child Welfare Agency?

- ❑ The assistance of a caseworker/social worker who will be a county, tribal, or state caseworker assigned to you and your family. In some cases you might also have other workers assigned to you, such as a treatment foster care worker or a residential treatment caseworker.
- ❑ A caseworker interacts with you, your parent(s), your caregiver, and other individuals in your life.
- ❑ A caseworker has the professional training to make decisions for your protection and safety.
- ❑ A caseworker has private, monthly in-person meetings with you to discuss how you are doing, any concerns you may have, case progress, and to share and provide you with information.
- ❑ A caseworker is available to you by phone and in person. You can always call your caseworker!
- ❑ A caseworker contacts your foster parent every month.
- ❑ A caseworker arranges contact between you and your family, including your siblings. Contact may include phone calls, letters, and in person contact.
- ❑ A caseworker connects you with services to help meet your needs.
- ❑ Fair treatment, whatever your gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, disability or medical needs.

Continued...

The agency will keep important records on your behalf:

- ❑ Your records (health, school, etc.) are required to be complete, accurate, and up-to-date.
- ❑ The agency is required to give you, your guardian, and your attorney a copy of your records.
- ❑ The agency must obtain important documents such as your birth certificate, report cards, etc.
- ❑ Agencies are only required to keep your records for seven years after case closure, unless an adoption occurs, in which the Department of Children and Families keeps your records forever.

The agency will create a case plan to meet you and your family's needs:

- ❑ The caseworker creates a plan to address concerns raised by you, your family, foster family, and the agency. The caseworker is required to get the opinions of all involved, including yours and two supportive adults of your choice.
- ❑ Your caseworker explains your plan and all the services included.
- ❑ Your plan considers your culture, identity, and ethnicity.

The agency will help you be heard in court and at meetings:

- ❑ You have a right to be heard in court.
- ❑ The agency will help you get an attorney, or to ask the judge to appoint one for you. You can request a meeting with your attorney at any time.
- ❑ The agency caseworker and your foster parents will assist you in getting to court and team meetings.
- ❑ The agency will help you communicate with the judge or other people making decisions about you, and will tell them what you want, because you may not be able to speak directly with the judge.

Do I have a Right to Confidentiality?

- ❑ You always have a right to confidentiality! This means information about you and your family is kept private.
- ❑ There are laws that protect you and your family's rights to privacy.
- ❑ The Child Welfare agency cannot talk about your private information without the permission of you and your family. There are circumstances where information may be shared in order to keep you safe.
- ❑ Remember, it is your decision on how much information you share with friends and other people about your situation.
- ❑ Child Welfare agencies are required to notify your school district when you have been placed in foster care, however, the reason for your placement remains confidential.

Checklist for Youth Turning 18

Have You…

- ❑ Made a list of important contact information (doctors, friends, family)?
- ❑ Found a safe and secure place to live?
- ❑ Obtained a copy of your school records?
- ❑ Applied for Medicaid or other health insurance (Badger Care Plus for former foster youth)?
- ❑ Found out where to go for medical care?
- ❑ Obtained a copy of your health care records from your agency?
- ❑ Decided who should make healthcare decisions for you if you are unable to do so (and completed the necessary paperwork)?
- ❑ Obtained your Social Security Card, original Birth Certificate, and other important documents?
- ❑ Obtained a picture ID (State issued ID or driver's license)?
- ❑ Registered to vote?
- ❑ Registered for the Selective Service (if you are male)?
- ❑ Received a copy of your credit report in order to protect yourself against identity theft?
  http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youth/independent/identity_theft.htm
- ❑ Asked your caseworker if you are eligible for social security or disability services?
- ❑ Completed your college application and FAFSA form by April 1st of your senior year (If you are going to college in fall)?
- ❑ Contacted your caseworker for assistance with the items on this checklist?
- ❑ Received a letter stating you were in foster care for financial aid purposes?

Transitioning to Independence

If you are over the age of 14, your agency is responsible for making sure you prepare for future independence by encouraging your participation in:

Activities:

- Age appropriate activities that you enjoy and provide good life experiences, such as camps, pre-college programs, volunteering, employment, driver's education, dating, and other things that help you become a well-rounded and self-sufficient adult, while respecting your abilities, culture, and religion.

Employment and Finances:

- Part time employment is encouraged as long as it does not interfere with your education or other restrictions by your agency.
- Saving money for your future and money management skills.
- Exploring career and educational options.
- When you turn 16, you will receive your credit report once a year and your agency will assist you in resolving any issues or inaccuracies within it.

Developing your life skills and planning for independent living by:

- Completing a life skills/independent living assessment to identify your strengths and needs.
- Developing a life skills/independent living plan, which includes your goals for the future and activities to help you get there.
- Participating in activities needed to strengthen and practice your life skills.
- Registering for **FosterClub** (www.fosterclub.com), a networking website for current and former foster youth.

National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) survey for foster youth

- This survey helps Wisconsin's child welfare, workforce, education and independent living programs know how former foster youth are doing at age 17 and after leaving foster care.
- This will help Wisconsin make changes to help foster youth in the future.
- You will be contacted at age 17, 19 and 21 to complete the NYTD survey.

What Happens if I Remain in Foster Care Until I'm 18?

- When you turn 17 1/2 years of age, your agency will talk with you about an Independent Living to Discharge Plan, focusing on the assistance, support and activities you need to help you transition from foster care to independence at age 18; including your specific plans for housing, income, employment, health, education, mentoring, and independent living services.
- You will receive information about services and funding available from your agency to assist you to live independently/pursuing higher education.
- You will have the option to stay in out-of-home care and return to out-of-home care up to your 21st birthday, if you are still enrolled in high school full-time and have an Individual Education Plan (IEP).

What Services are Available for Me?

You have the right to have your physical and emotional needs met:

- ❑ You can expect to see a licensed and trained care or service provider (doctors, eye doctors, dentists, counselors, and other mental health professionals) to ensure that you are healthy, and assist you if you are having any health issues.
- ❑ You have the right to confidential family planning services (such as birth control and sexual health education).
- ❑ You can have access to counseling to help you better understand or cope with your thoughts and feelings about current and past experiences.

You may be eligible for some government benefits:

- ❑ Your caseworker will help you apply for state and federal benefit programs that you may be eligible for. Government benefits may include Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), disability benefits, medical, and other programs for children and youth who are in foster care.

You should have all documents you are asked to sign explained to you:

- ❑ Any person who asks you to fill out or sign a paper should explain it to you first so you understand what you are signing and why you are being asked to sign it.

Questions/Notes:

_____

_____

_____

_____

If you have any concerns about your living situation, let your caseworker know.

What Can I Expect in My Foster Home?

To stay connected to your family:

- ❑ To be placed with your siblings if it is possible, safe, and appropriate.
- ❑ If placement together is not possible, you can expect to see your siblings at least once a month, unless the judge says you cannot.

To live in a safe place, including:

- ❑ Licensed Foster parent(s). The agency interviews, does background checks and trains foster parent(s) to provide you with the best care.
- ❑ A home free from physical or verbal punishment or abuse.
- ❑ A home where you will not get into trouble for telling people that your rights or safety are not being protected or that you do not feel safe.
- ❑ Meeting personal needs, such as clothing, housing, food, transportation and an allowance for which your caregiver receives some money to provide for you.

To live with caregivers who:

- ❑ Keep you safe and are respectful of your thoughts and feelings.
- ❑ Make sure you get the necessary medical and dental care.
- ❑ Help you keep connections to your family, culture, and heritage.
- ❑ Know and understand your personal history and your needs.
  It is important to share things about yourself (your likes and dislikes), since foster parent(s) only know the information that is given to them.
- ❑ Help you keep your family situation private and confidential.

To have your property protected:

- ❑ To have your property (clothes, music, books, and other things you own) kept where you live, and bring it with you if you move. If any of your property is inappropriate, a foster parent can restrict your access to it, but may not destroy it.
- ❑ To send and receive mail without anyone reading it, unless it is court ordered that someone else can open your mail to protect your safety.
- ❑ To make phone calls, unless your caseworker or a court order says you cannot.

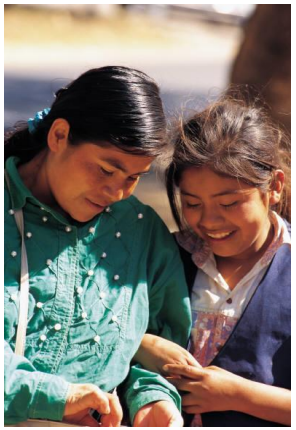
To be informed of any moves:

- ❑ To remain in the same foster home, unless it is explained to you why it is necessary for you to move in advance.

To be able to do things other kids do:

- ❑ Have a quiet place to do your homework.
- ❑ Participate in school and community activities, events, and extra-curricular or recreational opportunities.
- ❑ Have safe and age-appropriate employment.
- ❑ Feel normal (visit with friends, get haircuts, pursue interests, etc.).

What Can My Family Expect?



Your parent(s) can (unless your caseworker or court has said they cannot):

- ❑ Have at least one visit each month with you.
- ❑ Have additional contact with you by mail or phone.
- ❑ Attend medical appointments, school meetings, and any other meetings about you.
- ❑ Talk with you about why you are in foster care.

The agency to find permanence for you:

- ❑ The first goal the agency and your caseworker have for you and your family is for you to return home when it is safe and appropriate. If this is not possible, you can expect your caseworker to make every effort to find you a permanent home and family.

This is how other foster youth have described permanency: *"To me, **permanency** means having:*

- ⇒ *a place to do laundry,*
- ⇒ *someone to talk to when I've had a bad day,*
- ⇒ *someone who loves me even when I screw up or hurt them,*
- ⇒ *someone who remembers my birthday,*
- ⇒ *someone who gives me money in times of need,*
- ⇒ *someone whose cabinets I can raid when hungry,*
- ⇒ *someone who will attend my high school graduation,*
- ⇒ *someone who helps me find my potential,*
- ⇒ *someone who I would put down for my emergency contact,*
- ⇒ *someone who treats me like their own child even if I am not,*
- ⇒ *someone who helps me when times are hard,*
- ⇒ *a place to go for the holidays,*
- ⇒ *someone who encourages me to be better and*
- ⇒ *someone who LOVES me NO MATTER WHAT!"*

What Can I Expect for My Education?

- ❑ To remain at your school, if possible.
- ❑ To attend the most appropriate school for you.
- ❑ To go to school every day with very few disruptions by child welfare workers.
- ❑ To have an educational evaluation or educational services if you need them.
- ❑ To have your school records shared with your caseworker. Federal and state laws require your caseworker to get school records to make sure you are making progress and your needs are being met.
- ❑ The option to remain in foster care until age 19 if you will graduate from high school by your 19th birthday.
- ❑ Assistance with planning for a career and going to college, if that is what you want to do.