



# Wisconsin Family Ties

**PUBLIC COMMENT  
for the Wisconsin Council on Mental Health  
2018-19 Community Mental Health Services Block Grant  
19 July 2017**

On behalf of Wisconsin Family Ties, thank you for the chance to offer public comment relating to the 2018-19 Community Mental Health Services Block Grant application.

As the Council is well-aware, Wisconsin has been directed to submit a block grant application with a 26% reduction relative to 2017 funding levels. Wisconsin Family Ties appreciates the even-handed approach that the Bureau of Prevention Treatment and Recovery has brought to translating the directive into budget figures based on existing constraints in statute. We are confident that we can count on the Council's intense opposition to the proposed budget cuts at the federal level, and also aware that the Council's actions will be limited when it comes to the block grant application itself.

However, this opportunity for comment also gives Wisconsin Family Ties a chance to share about the peer support work we do with families of children and youth across the state, supported by block grant funding. We'd like to provide the Council with insight on the services we offer and the families we serve, in order to give an additional window into why constraining this funding at the federal level is such a foolhardy – even reprehensible – proposal.

Wisconsin Family Ties is a parent-run, nonprofit organization working statewide with families that include children with social, emotional or behavioral challenges. For thirty years since our founding in 1987, WFT has provided information, education, support and advocacy for youth with mental health challenges and their families. The core of our statewide work is peer support; the experience of our staff of parent peer specialists as parents of children with mental health needs provides us a unique insight into the challenges that families face. These shared experiences, coupled with in-depth and ongoing staff training, allow us to help families find their voice, to take ownership of their child's plan of care, and to thrive.

WFT has 15 parent peer specialists who together serve nearly 150 families per month. We work to break the loneliness, isolation and hopelessness that often grip these families. We teach skills, either directly or through modeling. We identify resources and assist the family in accessing and using those resources. We use relationships we've developed to help the family get their needs met. We get families involved in the systems that serve them, and we advocate at a systems level as well.

In 2016, our parent peer specialists attended 400 Individualized Education Program meetings, 39 court hearings, and over 550 wraparound meetings. We also held 30 training events, including the annual Children Come First Conference with an attendance approaching 600.

The outcomes for this statewide work show that peer support makes a powerful difference in families' lives. In early results from our 2017 interviews of families that received our parent peer specialist services, thirty percent of the interviewees indicated – without being directly asked – that

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their child would be placed out of the home if not for WFT. Ninety-five percent felt that WFT helped them become a better advocate for their child. Ninety-five percent felt that WFT helped them know the steps to take when they are concerned about services for their child, and 100% felt more capable of dealing with the various systems that serve their child.

We are also seeing encouraging preliminary results from research through the Medical College of Wisconsin, evaluating peer support more broadly. Of eleven mental health service options, peer support was most frequently ranked #1 in importance by research participants. In another powerful finding, when peer support connected respondents to additional services, engagement rate in those referred mental health services was an impressive 96%. The relationship between peer support and other mental health services is often inaccurately represented as being in opposition; these findings more properly cast the relationship as positively interconnected.

Unfortunately, the need for parent peer services greatly exceeds the supply. Families in Wisconsin are struggling, our presence is nowhere near comprehensive, and our caseloads are often full. Major depressive episodes among young people are on the rise, with Wisconsin among the highest 20% among all states in this regard. Youth admissions to Winnebago reflected a record spike in the month of May 2017. We clearly serve an underserved population.

Wisconsin Family Ties received \$265,877 in block grant funding in the most recent fiscal year. The proposed cut to the Child and Family Support area of the Mental Health Block Grant is 22%, which would be a reduction of \$57,677, a significant step backward for our ability to carry out our mission of changing lives by improving children's mental health.

I urge the Council to join Wisconsin Family Ties in advocating strongly to our Congressional delegation to restore the full funding for the Community Mental Health Services Block Grant, as well as to reverse any proposed budget reductions to Medicaid that would amplify the damage of the caps and cuts in the "American Health Care Act" as passed by the U.S. House of Representatives.

Thank you for your time. Please feel free to contact me for any additional information.

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