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CONTACT: Kathy Markeland, kmarkeland@wafca.org, 608.257.5939

Wisconsin Enacts New Law to Support Homeless Youth

At the State Capitol yesterday, Governor Tony Evers signed Assembly Bill 52, which will allow 17-year-olds who are unaccompanied and homeless to contract for admission to a shelter facility or transitional living program.

The new law responds to concerns raised by youth advocates and community service providers regarding a gap in service access for older youth with unstable living situations. These youth have limited access to shelter services, a problem that is exacerbated due to their disconnection from parents and guardians. AB 52 authorizes the oldest of these minors who have attained the age of 17 to access shelter or a transitional living program (TLP) without parental consent. The bill requires these youth to be identified as unaccompanied by their school's homeless liaison or by an employee of the shelter facility or TLP if a youth is disconnected from school. In addition, they may not be currently under the care and supervision of a social services agency.

"Building and restoring family connections between youth and their parents or guardians is a goal for all of those who serve runaway and homeless youth, but families are complex and unfortunately there are young people who are left without safe options," stated Emily Coddington, WAFCA Associate Director. "AB 52 is a step in the right direction and provides another alternative to help these young people secure safe housing – a space for them to continue working toward employment, educational goals and mental and emotional well-being."

WAFCA expressed gratitude for the leadership provided by Rep. Amy Loudenberg and Sen. Alberta Darling as co-authors of this legislation that received bipartisan support.

"As an organization that supports providers of youth services, we look forward to working with legislative leaders to continue expanding safe housing options for young people. With more than 2,200 students identified as unaccompanied in our state we know that there is more work to be done, including growing our state investments in shelter spaces dedicated to providing quality services targeted to youth," concluded Coddington.

The bill's signing was timely, as November is National Runaway Prevention Month. Visit the National Network for Youth website to download a toolkit and messaging guide to help raise awareness of runaway and homeless youth issues in your community. <https://www.nn4youth.org/engage/nrpm/>

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WAFCA is a member association that works to improve the lives of families and children in Wisconsin.

Our member agencies provide a wide array of prevention and supportive services such as foster care, in-home support, counseling, and mental health treatment. WAFCA represents over 50 child and family serving agencies and leaders in the field and advocates for the more than 250,000 individuals and families that they serve each year.

Wisconsin Association of Family & Children's Agencies
16 N. Carroll Street, Suite 750 | Madison WI 53703
Office: 608.257.5939 | Fax: 608.268.7258 | wafca.org