

# **WILL: Researcher publishes paper on religious freedom and the child welfare system**

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June 7, 2018 - Milwaukee, WI - Writing for The Heritage Foundation, WILL Research Fellow Natalie Goodnow has authored a paper, titled The Role of Faith-Based Agencies in the Child Welfare System. It examines how states work with faith-based agencies (FBAs) to provide services such as foster care and adoption. Many FBAs have been doing child welfare work for over 100 years, predating the involvement of the government and the creation of the modern child welfare system. States still rely heavily on FBAs today.

But these partnerships are under an existential threat in some parts of the United States because of the sincerely held religious beliefs of FBAs. As a result, some quality providers have been forced to end their child welfare services.

The full paper can be read here. Highlights include:

## **The child welfare system is strained**

Due in part to the opioid crisis, the foster care system is currently under great stress. Nationwide there was a 10% increase in the number of children in foster care from 2012-2016. In Wisconsin that growth was 20%. During that same time, the number of children waiting to be adopted in Wisconsin grew by 23%, compared to a 15% increase seen in the U.S.

## **Faith communities and FBAs serve as valuable partners in meeting this need**

Research has shown that faith-based organizations may excel at recruiting, training, and supporting foster parents, having a unique ability to tap into new populations to foster and adopt. The child welfare system is made up of a variety of public and private providers, both secular and faith-based.

## **Nine states legally protect FBAs**

Recognizing the importance of FBAs, nine states – including two this past May – have passed laws protecting FBAs from regulations that would require them to choose between providing foster care and adoption services and following their faith. Wisconsin has no such law on the books.

In some states FBAs are under threat and some have been forced to cease their services

Several areas, such as Illinois, San Francisco, Boston, and Washington, D.C., have already ceased working with some FBAs due to their religious beliefs, despite the significant need for resources and foster care providers. This resulted in the displacement of thousands of children, who had to be shuffled into other agencies.

Michigan passed a law in 2015 allowing FBAs to serve in accordance with their sincerely held beliefs. However, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is working to overturn this law. The ACLU has sued the state of Michigan for partnering with St. Vincent Catholic Charities and organizations like it, alleging these FBAs discriminate by operating in accordance with their religious beliefs. St. Vincent excels in finding homes for large sibling groups and teens, which are traditionally more difficult to place. St. Vincent also recruited more new adoptive families than almost 90% of the other providers in its area in 2017.

Meanwhile the city of Philadelphia has suspended its contracts with Bethany Christian Services and Catholic Charities, investigating them for discrimination, while simultaneously issuing a call for 300 new foster families.

## **The role of FBAs is becoming a national issue**

The work of faith-based agencies in the child welfare system is drawing national attention. On May 23rd, 2018, 80 members of Congress, including Wisconsin U.S. Rep. Glenn Grothman, sent a letter to President Trump requesting action be taken to protect FBAs. They noted that “faith-based agencies now face mounting threats to their ability to continue doing their critical and mission-driven work.” A bill

introduced by Rep. Kelly (R-PA) in Congress would prohibit states from discriminating against FBAs due to their religious beliefs. A bill pushed by Rep. Gillibrand (D-NY) would do the opposite, preventing FBAs from operating in accordance with their religious beliefs.