

Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty: Opioid crisis is straining Wisconsin's foster care system

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Contact:

Cameron Sholty | WILL Communications Director
cameron@will-law.org | 414-727-7416 | 262-409-9816

Milwaukee, WI - Today the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty (WILL) released *Flooding The System: A Study of Opioids and Out-of-Home Care in Wisconsin*. This original analysis, authored by Research Fellow Natalie Goodnow and Research Director Will Flanders, found a relationship between Wisconsin's opioid crisis and the number of children in out-of-home care.

Wisconsin is currently experiencing a public health crisis with opioids. The number of overdose deaths involving all types of opioids in Wisconsin was seven times higher in 2016 than it was in 2000. Overdose deaths involving heroin increased a staggering 1180% between 2006 and 2016, and deaths involving synthetic opioids grew by over 400%. And neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS), when babies are exposed to drugs or alcohol in the womb and are born addicted, has quadrupled since 2006.

Goodnow and Flanders, using publicly available data from the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, the Wisconsin Department of Health, and the Centers for Disease Control, conducted an econometric analysis to determine whether Wisconsin's opioid crisis was, in fact, having an effect on the foster care system, and to what extent. The findings include:

Opioid prescription rates and opioid-related hospitalizations are both strongly

related to the number of kids in out-of-home care.

The rate of children entering care is strongly related to the number of opioid-related hospitalizations. As opioid-related hospitalizations increase, so does the number of kids entering foster care.

The rate of neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS) – when babies are exposed to drugs or alcohol in the womb and are born addicted – is strongly related to the number of kids age 0-1 in foster care.

In response to the opioid crisis, the Wisconsin legislature has undertaken the HOPE Agenda, a bipartisan effort led by Rep. John Nygren, to expand access to resources and treatment. In addition, Speaker Robin Vos created a Foster Care Task Force to assemble a package of bipartisan bills to reform foster care. This is a good start and the report offers additional recommendations for foster care reform given the urgency of the opioid crisis.

Make it easier for proven foster parents in other states to become licensed when they move to Wisconsin.

Allow youth to stay in care until 21 if working or in school. Youth in care who age out at 18 have worse outcomes than those who age out around 21.

Youth in care should have the means to learn how to drive and get their license.

Driving is an important life skill that can be useful for educational and employment opportunities.

Establish grants for nonprofits, counties, and tribes for innovative supports for women that abuse substances who are pregnant or have just given birth.

WILL Research Fellow Natalie Goodnow said:

“Wisconsin is undertaking critical work on opioid abuse and the growing number of children in foster care. Our findings confirm the importance of these efforts and should serve to inform legislators and advocates as they continue to craft policies and practices to build up families and protect vulnerable children. The bottom line is, the growing number of at-risk children in out-of-home care deserve the same care and opportunities to succeed as every child in the Badger State.”

The full study can be found [here](#).