



Legislative Briefs

from the Wisconsin
Legislative Reference Bureau

Legislative Brief 02-2

August 2002

SECOND-CHANCE HOMES FOR TEENAGE MOTHERS

2001 Wisconsin Act 69, which took effect April 26, 2002, provides for the licensing of second-chance group homes for teen parents and expectant mothers in need of safe and structured living arrangements. The law was enacted in response to the rising number of teen mothers who need shelter and assistance in raising their newborns while attempting to finish school and obtain stable employment to support themselves and their children. The legislation is patterned on laws passed in several other states and recommendations from the Second-Chance Homes Conference, organized in 2000 by Representative Suzanne Jeskewitz.

BACKGROUND

Almost 6,000 unmarried girls under the age of 20 give birth in Wisconsin every year. Furthermore, within two years, approximately half of all teen mothers have another child. These young women are less likely to complete high school and more likely to become long-term welfare recipients than women who have children later in life. The problem also carries over from one generation to the next. Girls born to teenage mothers are six times more likely to become teen mothers themselves. Preliminary research shows, however, that second-chance homes may be able to break that cycle. According to early studies, former residents of second-chance homes report fewer repeat pregnancies, better high school/GED completion rates, stronger life skills, and healthier babies.

Second-chance homes are supervised, nurturing residences for teen custodial parents who have no other place to go. In most cases, these teens have experienced abuse, neglect, substance abuse, or other difficult circumstances in their families-of-origin, making it impossible for them to remain at home. Second-chance homes are designed to provide them the services they need to become self-sufficient and caring parents. The homes help young parents complete their education, secure sound employment, break the cycle of child neglect and abuse, and set goals for a more promising future.

By the close of 2001, more than 100 second-chance homes were operating in some 29 states. There currently are seven group homes in Wisconsin that are licensed primarily to provide care for pregnant and parenting teens, and several more are under development.

COURT ORDERED SECOND-CHANCE HOUSING

Act 69 offers the juvenile court the option of placing a minor who has been found delinquent or in need of protection or services (and the minor's child) in a second-chance home if the child is: 1) at least 12 years of age, 2) an expectant mother or custodial parent, 3) receiving inadequate care, and 4) in need of a safe and structured living arrangement. The state reimburses the costs paid by the counties for these placements.

VOLUNTARY OPTION

The act also broadens a teen's options by allowing an expectant mother or custodial parent who is at least 14 years old to seek voluntary placement in a second-chance home if the minor's

parents approve the arrangement. Like those placed by the court, minors who volunteer to enter the second-chance program undergo an initial case review. The original placement may not exceed six months, but the stay may be extended for six months if an independent reviewing agency determines extension is in the best interests of the minor. (Extensions beyond 12 months require a court order.) If the voluntary resident cannot pay for the placement, the second-chance home will have to cover the placement through its own funding.

LICENSING REQUIREMENTS

The Department of Health and Family Services is responsible for licensing the second-chance homes, which exist solely for the purpose of providing a safe and structured living arrangement for custodial parents and expectant mothers between the ages of 12 and 18. Although most residents must leave the home when they reach age 18, the law does permit an extension for a full-time student who will be able to complete a high school program before turning 19.

The homes are required to teach child development, family budgeting, health and nutrition, and other skills to promote economic independence of the parent and the well-being of the child. Administrative rules governing detailed operation of the homes will be promulgated by the department.

FUNDING AND MATCHING STATE GRANTS

In Wisconsin, second-chance homes are currently dependent upon support from private nonprofit organizations, federal grants, faith-based organizations, and private donations. The Wisconsin Association of Homeless and Runaway Services has applied for a federal grant for second-chance homes as part of the 2002 federal budget. The recipients will be announced later this year.

Although Act 69, which passed both houses of the legislature with almost unanimous support, contained language that provided for state matching grants for second-chance homes, no funding was appropriated for the 2001-2003 biennium. The grant program would require that residents be employed or enrolled as students at a high school, technical college, or college, unless the director of the agency operating the home determines there is good reason for the parent not to enroll or work. Homes receiving grants would have to offer assessment and case management to residents and train the parents in independent living and life choice decision making, family planning and relationships, economic self-sufficiency, and how to access community resources, including transportation and transitional housing. Mental health and alcohol and other drug abuse services would also be provided, if needed.

The grant language also allows second-chance homes to provide additional services such as counseling and job training, along with advice on parenting and life skills, to family members concerned with the mother and child, such as the noncustodial parent or the baby's grandparents. Former residents of second-chance homes would be eligible for support services.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

A copy of 2001 Wisconsin Act 69 is available at www.legis.state.wi.us/2001/data/acts or by calling the Legislative Reference Bureau at (608) 266-0341. For further information on second-chance homes, contact Sally Hanko Dees, Department of Health and Family Services at (608) 266-0415.