

AFRICAN-AMERICANS UNITED FOR INCLUSIVE CHILD WELFARE REFORM

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AFRICAN-AMERICANS UNITE TO ADDRESS CHILD WELFARE DEATHS

Milwaukee, WI—(February 24, 2009)—In response to the recent deaths of children in the state-administered child welfare system for Milwaukee County, several African-American child welfare agencies have come together to form an advocacy coalition. The executives of Fresh Start Family Services, Inc., Harmony Social Service Child Placing Agency, and New Horizon Center, Inc. announced they have launched African-Americans United for Inclusive Child Welfare Reform.

The goal of the coalition is to educate the community, bring attention to the child welfare system's disproportionate impact on African-American children and families, and offer concrete solutions. "*Child welfare in Milwaukee County is in crisis,*" said Larry Reed, Child Welfare Administrator with Harmony Social Service Child Placing Agency. "*No one is more impacted by the crisis than the African-American community, and we want to be a voice for improving services to our community.*"

Based on state demographic data, nearly three out of every four children involved in the child welfare system in Milwaukee County are African-Americans.

In December, following another child's death, La Causa, Inc. notified the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare (BMCW) that it will relinquish its contract to provide ongoing case management and safety services by April 2009. BMCW officials have indicated state government will only consider three agencies to replace La Causa, Inc., including Lutheran Social Services, Children's Family and Community Partnerships, and St. Aemilian-Lakeside, Inc.

Lutheran Social Services is being considered, despite the fact that a 2006 state-performed audit documented the organization had charged the State of Wisconsin \$568,167 in unallowable and questioned costs. State records also show Lutheran Social Services is under consideration without having applied to provide

ongoing case management and safety services when the state sought bidders in 2005.

The coalition pointed out, if the state selects Children's Family and Community Partnerships as the replacement agency, an arm of Children's Hospital and Health Systems will have responsibility for nearly every aspect of the child welfare system in Milwaukee County. Shaun Robey, Program Manager with Fresh Start Family Services, Inc., questioned the approach: *"Is it a prudent policy for BMCW to risk the well-being of Milwaukee County's most vulnerable children and families by consolidating all child welfare service delivery for the most vulnerable of our children and families in the best interest of this community?"*

"We believe part of the solution is being more inclusive, having the State of Wisconsin allow community-based and culturally specific agencies to play a significant role in the child welfare system," said Jermaine Reed Fresh Start Family Services Executive Director. *"The state should include more African-American child welfare organizations, agencies who understand the realities African-American children and families face on a daily basis as well as the neighborhoods in which they live, given that the BMCW's client population is 73% African-American."*

New Horizon Center, Inc. President & CEO Saleem El-Amin explained, *"Often living well below the poverty level, having less education, and being unemployed, these families can feel powerless when dealing with a system that has authority over them. These children and families may see the child welfare system as being punitive and are, therefore, reluctant to open up to them."*

Mr. El-Amin continued, *"The families need to be able to relate to and trust the professionals interacting with them. Until BMCW fully involves more professionals from the very community most intimately affected by the child welfare crisis, the distrust will continue—sometimes with tragic consequences."*

According to a 2004 analysis prepared by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, a think-tank headquartered in Washington, D.C., Wisconsin removes a higher proportion of African-American children from their homes than any state in the nation.

The coalition, African-Americans United for Inclusive Child Welfare Reform, has developed a position paper regarding the state of child welfare in Milwaukee County. For more information on ways to get involved with the coalition and impact the direction of child welfare reforms affecting the community, please contact Jermaine Reed at (414) 431-0821, ext. 102, or JReed@FreshStartMilwaukee.com