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Session Series: Supporting Strong Wisconsin Families

Even under divided government, the Wisconsin Legislature and my office were successful in accomplishing a lot of great things for our state this session. I am introducing a new series of columns, which will take a deeper dive into issues we addressed in sectors ranging from agriculture to health to public safety.

I recognize and value the hard work it takes to grow, nurture, support and lead a family. Wisconsinites benefit from providing our children with a solid foundation and encouraging family stability at all stages. From decreased crime and incarceration rates to less instances of early parenthood, the state has a huge return on investment in strengthening families. I have done a lot of work in this area in the past as a founding member of the Wisconsin Legislative Children's Caucus, member of the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board and having served on numerous task forces, councils and other groups.

I was able to utilize my experience by serving as the vice-chair of the Senate Human Services, Children and Families Committee this session. I am proud of the work we were able to accomplish in this committee. We addressed legislation that ranged from birth to long-term care, approved a number of important appointments and reviewed the Department of Children and Families reports of child abuse and neglect and other egregious acts committed against children placed in out-of-home care. I enjoyed the productive conversations this committee had about how we can ensure a bright and prosperous future for everyone in our state.

This session was also my first term as a member of the Joint Committee on Finance. This committee crafts the state budget and ensures Wisconsin is responsibly investing in programs and services. In the past few legislative sessions, I authored a bill to provide additional funding to a program called Reach Out and Read. This program helps educate parents on how to provide a healthy cognitive, social and emotional foundation for their children through distributing books at a child's health care screening. This session, I was successful in securing funding for this initiative in the state budget. Data shows that 80% of brain growth happens in the first three years of life. Reach Out and Read helps families feel confident in enhancing their child's development.

Family means something different for everyone. They are dynamic; no one family looks exactly like the other, so when we consider family-centered policy, it is important to contemplate the variety of services and institutions they may interact with. Some families need assistance to take care of an elder relative, and another couple may need resources

after they decide to adopt. Families can also separate, which brings its own set of complications. A few bills I authored with Representative Rodriguez (R-Oak Creek) this session deal with court procedures and what happens after a family decides to part.

[2021 Wisconsin Act 169](#) allows court commissioners, who are lawyers appointed by circuit court judges, to preside at fully stipulated legal separations. Court commissioners already exercise many functions of a judge, so this will allow our overwhelmed circuit courts more time to spend on contested cases. [2021 Wisconsin Act 259](#) details which financial documents need to be exchanged annually after a divorce is finalized and by what date to help determine child support, family support or maintenance. [2021 Wisconsin Act 20](#) provides flexibility to separated parents by allowing them to anticipate and incorporate reasonably certain future events, like starting or switching schools, when negotiating a custody or placement order. All these bills help reduce litigation time and allow families to readjust and move forward quickly and with clarity.

My office also authored two bills that were brought to our attention by unfortunate constituent stories. [2021 Wisconsin Act 90](#), also known as "Harpers Law", adds information about the state's Safe Haven Law to human growth and development curriculum. The Safe Haven Law allows parents to anonymously relinquish their newborn children to emergency services without consequence, so long as the child is less than 72 hours old. Harper was tragically killed instead of taken to an adoption agency as planned. I authored this legislation with Representative Todd Novak (R-Dodgeville), and our hope is it will provide young parents another option to consider when they are faced with an unexpected pregnancy and the pressures and stress that come along with it.

[2021 Wisconsin Act 182](#) was brought forward by Ashley Lien and Becky Guidis. They are mothers who tirelessly advocated to protect their children from the stigma surrounding actions taken by their former partners. The legislation Representative Jesse James (R-Altoona) and I authored allows one parent to change the name of their child, who is 14 years or younger, if the other parent was convicted of certain homicide or sex related crimes. I have heard stories of the financial, emotional and mental struggle these families encountered when trying to move on from past trauma. Children are innocent victims of the crimes their parents commit. This is a productive step to help families disassociate and begin to rebuild their lives.

I am two years into my four year term, and I am looking forward to building upon the important work done this legislative session. I will take this summer to research and refine proposals, hold listening sessions, tour facilities around the district and assist with constituents navigating state processes. If you have ideas or suggestions for future proposals, please do not hesitate to reach out to my office.

To reach Sen. Ballweg with questions or comments please call (608) 266-0751 or email Sen.Ballweg@legis.wi.gov. Visit her website, legis.wisconsin.gov/senate/14/ballweg, to subscribe to her weekly e-update.

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