



## Senate committee advances Family Navigators bill

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(MADISON) – Today the Senate Workforce committee advanced SB 344, which will continue the successful Family Navigator approach that has improved the educational, and employment outcomes and the lives of low-income people with disabilities and their families.

Wisconsin was one of six states awarded a five-year federal PROMISE grant by the Social Security Administration. Family Navigators are one of several strategies that have been demonstrated to be highly effective to transform what families feel is possible, and ultimately employment success.

Family Navigators work with families to solve real life problems in order to create a path to employment. Navigators are typically someone from the community, who is experienced with disability, who has similar experiences to the families they are developing relationships with and is knowledgeable and connected to the local communities where they and the families they work with live.

“Family Navigators are not a referral service; these are not people who hand out pamphlets. They are trusted folks that have established credibility and have personal relationships with families. They meet people where they are and walk with individuals and families to find their path to employment and economic independence,” said Beth Swedeen, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities (BPDD).

Often, low-income families have many daily challenges that impact employment—including lack of transportation, housing instability, food insecurity, caregiver shortages, childcare access, health or chronic conditions that require appointments and ongoing therapy, and other issues. Many people with disabilities and families rely on means tested benefit programs that have strict income, asset, and other requirements. Fear of losing access to programs that are critical to survival—including Social Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Income (SSDI), Medicaid, FoodShare, Housing Assistance, etc.--if they work at all or too much is a huge barrier to overcome.

Family Navigators build relationships over time. Their connection to families and the wider community is critical to understanding the entire context of people’s lives and how to help families problem-solve their unique sets of circumstances and challenges.

“Sometimes the solution is not a government program or service, but a connection to another person in the community who has a job referral, is looking for a carpool partner, who can provide childcare,” said Beth Swedeen. “Simple things that are not part of a service system can make an incredible difference, but that demands a knowledge of what people need and people on the ground with the knowledge of the community who can make it happen.”

BPDD hopes the full Senate will take up the bill for consideration in the upcoming fall session.