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Testimony in Opposition to Senate Bill 295
Senate Committee on Children and Families and Department of Workforce Development
Julaine K. Appling, WFA President
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Thank you, Chairman Jauch and committee members, for the opportunity to testify today on Senate Bill 295. My name is Julaine Appling, and I am testifying today as president of Wisconsin Family Action, a statewide organization that represents tens of thousands of Wisconsin individuals and families, as well as hundreds of churches that are concerned about strengthening and preserving marriage, family, life and liberty in our state. I am speaking today in opposition to SB 295.

I was originally thinking that I would testify today for information only. However, upon further reflection and research, I determined the only appropriate position on this bill for our organization was “opposed.”

When the author’s staff member informed us that the bill was introduced because of a specific musically prodigious ten-year-old child who was not able to play in cabarets, taverns, roadhouses, night clubs, and other similar places, I realized we were once again about to make bad public policy because of a legislator’s reaction to a single incident.

Current law prudently protects children 14 year-old and younger minors by prohibiting them from being employed as musicians, singers, performers or dancers at a roadhouse, cabaret, dance hall, night club, tavern or similar place. Obviously, when the legislature passed that provision they were concerned about the health and well-being of young, impressionable children. Such places are designed for adults, with drinking and adult-oriented entertainment. Regardless of whether a minor is providing entertainment, is accompanied by his/her parents, and is out before 9 or 10 p.m., all of which are provisions in SB 295, we believe such environments are not suitable for children, and the state should not be in any way sanctioning their employment in such establishments.

We do not see that this bill is something numerous people are requesting. Further, while it is good to see that the authors of this bill would require a parent to be present, even the best of parents cannot prevent the influence of the environment in such a place, whose very reason for existence is to entertain adults. We can also easily see this provision being used by those so inclined to exploit children—and not just financially. For example, while the bill does not specifically state that “dancers” are included in the type of entertainment, it does state “performers” would be permitted. Unless Wisconsin Statutes makes a very clear distinction between “performers” and “dancers” for these types of establishments, it is certainly not far-fetched to think that a child dancer could easily be not only exploited but likely set up for abuse—not within the establishment of course, but by the exposure at the establishment.

And, finally, we contend that in a state where underage drinking is endemic, purposely changing this law in a way that allows any minors 14 and under to spend considerable time as an employee or performer in roadhouses, cabarets, dance halls, night clubs, taverns or similar places, establishments specifically catering to drinking, will undoubtedly contribute to the problem.

It is our understanding that the Department of Workforce Development, through its promulgated rules and regulations, functions as the police, so to speak, for this bill, having to make the determination of whether or not a particular place is detrimental to the health, safety or welfare of the minor.

We fail to see how any of the above-noted establishments is not detrimental to the health, safety or welfare of the minor entertainer, no matter how exceptionally talented he/she may be.

I doubt that it is any secret that Wisconsin Family Action ardently supports limited government. However, we do not think government is inherently evil and has no role in society. To the contrary, we recognize and agree that government has some very clearly defined and appropriate roles. One of those is the protection of its citizens. Government must take special care that it protects the most vulnerable, its young people, from inappropriate influences, in particular from places and people who could take advantage of a young person in the most heinous of ways. This bill, with distinctly no popular mandate but rather a single family asking for it, would certainly put government in a position, at the very least, of removing appropriate prohibitions and, at worst, sanctioning exposure of young people to that which is detrimental to their health, safety or welfare.

I urge you to oppose SB 295.