



## Candidate Engagement & Messages 2024

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*Legal disclaimer: This document does not constitute legal advice. Please engage legal counsel for official guidance on non-profit rules and regulations regarding lobbying and advocacy.*

Election season is a key time for raising awareness of the public policy issues that matter for Wisconsin's communities. Engaging with candidates builds early relationships with policymakers and aligns with a nonpartisan approach to educating decision-makers and influencing policy change. People who volunteer to run for office are providing an important public service and engagement with them helps to advance community well-being.

**Considerations as you engage:** While you may have a professional/agency-based interest or expertise to share, this resource is intended to help you connect as an individual constituent. While you may also use these resources to support your organization/agency-based outreach, be mindful of the following:

- Be aware of your organization/employer policies and seek authorization to coordinate any candidate engagement on behalf of your organization/agency.
- If you invite a candidate or elected official to visit with a program/coalition, remember that this engagement should always be nonpartisan and focused on issue education.
- Invitations should be extended to all candidates for office.
- Your organization or meeting should not be a place for candidates to seek endorsement or share their literature. Be cautious about a candidate using photos or quotes from the visit/event.

### Why Candidate Engagement Matters

- **Early Relationships:** Connecting with candidates helps to influence their priorities.
- **Nonpartisan Advocacy:** Engaging with both incumbents and challengers ensures a balanced approach, fostering understanding across the political spectrum.
- **Amplifying Issues:** Candidates have influence within their communities and drawing their attention to issues during campaign season elevates public awareness.

### How to Get Involved

- **Reach out to Candidates via their Websites or Email:** Reach out to candidates to share priorities and questions about their commitment on issues you care about.
- **Attend Forums and Events:** Participate in events hosted by candidates and other civic organizations to learn about their platforms and introduce them to important advocacy priorities.
- **Build Long-Term Relationships:** Continuously engage with both incumbents and challengers to establish lasting connections that transcend election cycles. Remember that policymakers need to be generalists on a wide range of issues and they rely on trusted constituents to provide expertise.

### Steps for Effective Engagement

1. **Research Candidate Platforms:** Understand the key issues and positions of each candidate to be informed.
2. **Schedule a Meeting:** Contact candidates' offices to schedule meetings, invite them for an on-site visit and help them directly experience an issue, program or resource.
3. **Prepare Your Message:** Be clear about advocacy priorities, your own experiences and stories, and how they align with the candidate's interests and community needs.
4. **Follow Up:** Maintain ongoing communication with candidates to reinforce the relationship and keep priorities and your own causes on their radar.
5. **Report Back:** After you connect, share insights and outcomes from your meetings and interactions with your WAFCA advocacy team. [Use this form to notify us!](#)

## General Guide for Non-Profit Advocacy/Election Activity

<p><b>Prohibited Activities for 501(c)(3) Organizations</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Endorsing a candidate</li> <li>• Holding a political/campaign fundraiser at your site</li> <li>• Allowing a candidate to circulate nomination papers on your property</li> <li>• Putting a yard sign on property</li> <li>• Indicating support for one party or another on behalf of the organization</li> <li>• Using federal funds for any lobbying activities</li> <li>• Spending a “substantial part” of time/effort on lobbying</li> </ul>
<p><b>Lobbying – Should be Minimal and Restricted for Nonprofits</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calling a legislator to ask them to vote in support of a specific bill</li> <li>• Requesting that the Medicaid Director change a specific administrative rule</li> <li>• Providing testimony in support or opposition to a bill at a public hearing</li> </ul>
<p><b>Advocacy and Education (Non-Lobbying Activities) – Unrestricted and Encouraged for Nonprofits</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educating an elected official about a community issue you want them to pay attention to</li> <li>• Calling a legislator and telling them to support efforts that expand access to mental health care</li> <li>• Conducting a visit with a lawmaker and showing them your agency’s work</li> <li>• Voter registration efforts (must be non-partisan such as by a group like the League of Women Voters)</li> <li>• Submitting an information-only memo on a topic to a state legislator</li> <li>• Responding to requests for information from policymakers</li> <li>• Sending a letter to an elected official and asking them to consider your subject matter expertise on family services and mental health issues</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from WAFCA partner WPHCA <https://www.wphca.org/public-policy/advocate-resources/>

### Other Resources:

- [WAFCA Legislative Advocacy 101](#)
- [Election dos and don'ts](#) (Independent Sector)
- [Nonprofits and Elections 2024](#) (Feb 2024 webinar)
- Ballotpedia ([State Assembly](#); [State Senate](#))

### Questions?

Kathy Markeland, [kmarkeland@wafca.org](mailto:kmarkeland@wafca.org)  
 Emily Coddington, [ecoddington@wafca.org](mailto:ecoddington@wafca.org)  
 WAFCA | 608.257.5939 | [wafca.org](http://wafca.org)

## WAFCA Messages for Engaging Candidates

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### About WAFCA

*Note: While you may not want to share specifics about WAFCA, candidates may not have a strong understanding of the public/private partnership that exists throughout our human services ecosystem. The following can help contextualize our sectors' contributions to the health and well-being of our communities.*

WAFCA is a statewide network of non-profit and for-profit providers of mental health and human services. WAFCA members' services include an array of prevention, child welfare, mental health and substance use treatment services across the continuum of care. WAFCA members employ more than 6000 human services professionals across Wisconsin providing critical supports in collaboration with state, county and school partners. Our member providers are critical community connectors and advocates. They engage their community funders and leaders to amplify the work that they do in partnership with the public sector.

Human services providers are key to Wisconsin's economic and social infrastructure. We work with parents to support the formation of lasting bonds with their babies; share strategies and pathways for healing as families recover from trauma; empower youth to discover purpose and hope; and use the power of relationship and connection to help every individual we serve realize their full human potential.

### PREVENTION AND EARLY SUPPORT ARE KEY

WAFCA members serve many individuals who have experienced abuse, neglect, and other forms of trauma; who are living in communities struggling with poverty and violence; and who lack housing and transportation. These individuals are also trying to maintain employment, raise children, and improve their quality of life. Rather small investments in resources that support basic needs – food, housing, transportation, etc. – as well as larger investments in things like the Earned Income Tax Credit and childcare, could change the trajectory of many children and families. In addition to these basic needs supports, key prevention programs can connect families to resources.

#### **Home Visiting**

The Family Foundations Home Visiting (FFHV) program is a voluntary service for new parents that provides education, employment support, and connection to community services, mental and physical health resources, and more. Outcomes research has shown that each dollar invested in evidence-based home visiting programs can yield up to \$5.70 in savings in the long run. Long term cost savings include reduced health services use (including emergency department visits), reduced costs of child protection services, and decreased special education placements and grade repetition, which results in higher educational attainment and economic success later in life. (Source: [NCSL](#), 3/22) Home visiting is not available in every region of the state and Wisconsin provides less state funding for home visiting than many of our midwestern neighbors.

#### **Family Resource Centers**

Family Resource Centers use a two-generation approach for their services and programming – engaging both family members/caregivers and children in an open and welcoming community space. Family Resource Centers are an active part of the neighborhoods in which they are based. As a result, they respond to the varying factors shaping the lives of the children and families they serve. Centering these child-adult relationships within unique communities is critical to building Positive Childhood Experiences, reducing child abuse and neglect, and preventing long-term health, economic, and social consequences. (Source: [CANPB](#), 2021)

**Message:** Offer a tour of your family resource center or share a story of a family who benefitted from prevention services. Share data on the number of families reached through your prevention programming and how you combine donor/government resources to reach more families. Talk about the power to peer-to-peer relationships that can be built through your home visiting and family resource center services.

These programs deliver real dividends for our communities. They engage children in early developmental phases and relieve parental stress. They are a key building block for family stability and diverting families from the child welfare system.

### **MEDICAID SUPPORTS HEALTH CARE FOR ALL**

Wisconsin Medical Assistance (ie Medicaid) is a foundational building block for our health care, disability services, eldercare and mental health and substance use treatment systems in Wisconsin. Everyone in the state is impacted by the level of investment and the operational effectiveness of our Medical Assistance funding stream. For children and adults with mental health and substance use conditions, Medicaid supported programs like Comprehensive Community Services, the Community Support Program and county-supported crisis services are essential to helping people reach their full potential in community. Medicaid supports critical early access to mental health treatment for our students in school and helps low-income working parents obtain mental health and substance use treatment to support family stability.

**Message:** Share how Medicaid is important for your programs and the children and families that you support. Note that as a provider working with counties and schools, your agency serves a disproportionate share of Medicaid eligible individuals – and Medicaid payment rates should support the cost of care. Medicaid is helping us serve more people, more effectively in community and we could move further, faster if we would complete the work of BadgerCare expansion for Wisconsin and enable our state to benefit from all of the federal funding available to us.

### **SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH WORKS**

K-12 students spend most of their time at school. Because of this, teachers & school counselors are often the first to identify or hear about mental health challenges. For many families, it is easier to have students access care at school than it is at home or after school. Transportation, student extracurricular involvement, and caretaker availability can all be barriers to accessing care outside of schools.

The good news is that there is plenty of data showing that school mental health works. The bad news is that eroding federal funding coupled with school finance challenges and insufficient insurance reimbursement for treatment services at school make it difficult to grow and sustain mental health supports for children at school. The Wisconsin Legislature allocated limited grant funding for each WI school district in the 2023-35 biennium. Without action in the coming legislative session those grants will decline, instead of growing to meet the growing need.

**Message:** Share the impact of providing your agency services in collaboration with schools. Talk about the importance of sustained resources to keep your therapists available for students regardless of ability to pay. Note the barriers that families face with high deductibles, insufficient networks and failure to reimburse for post-master's therapists in training. The demand for school-based services and supports far exceeds our capacity to respond and state grants can and should do more to level the playing field so all students get the support they need to succeed.

### **GROWING OUR CURRENT AND FUTURE HUMAN SERVICES WORKFORCE**

While Wisconsin is facing employment challenges across all sectors, there has been additional focus recently on the health care workforce. The behavioral health sector and human services sector are sometimes at risk of being overlooked as key contributors to individual and community health.

#### ***Peer Specialists***

WAFCA strongly supports increased opportunities for funding community-focused providers (i.e. care extenders) under Medicaid. Key to this extended array of professionals are “certified peer specialists” who use their personal lived experience to provide support to others and demonstrate that recovery is possible. Currently, Medicaid has limited channels for funding peer specialists and private insurers generally do not cover these peer specialists at all. The pool of certified peer specialists continues to grow and supporting these professionals with fair wages and benefits requires equitable levels of insurance reimbursement. Forty states cover peer specialists in their Medicaid programs and of those

twenty report no limits on the services. Meanwhile Wisconsin Medicaid currently limits reimbursement for peers to CCS and select substance use treatment programs. (KFF, 2022)

### ***In Training Mental Health Therapists***

The pathway to full licensure requires that post-master's professionals spend 3000 hours under supervised practice. Agencies that hire and supervise in-training clinicians (aka qualified treatment trainees (QTTs)) incur additional costs for supporting these practitioners. QTTs require enhanced supervision and training, while also serving a reduced caseload, leaving an agency to fund the balance of their salary. The current QTT grant program helps to offset some of those costs and support the next generation of master's level mental health therapists. In recent years the program has enabled agencies to employ hundreds of new practitioners targeting traditionally underserved populations and geographically diverse regions of the state. (University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, 2022)

**Message:** Talk about how the people you serve can benefit from better funding options for your paraprofessionals, bachelor's and master's level workforce. Share a story about the impact of certified peer specialists on the families you are serving. Describe how in-training therapists are supported by your clinical supervisors and the associated costs. Talk about the challenge of competing with health systems and others who have more diversified or sustainable funding. Agencies serving specialized needs and caring for a disproportionate share of Medicaid eligible individuals should receive recognition through Medicaid rates for providing access and specialized care. While more psychiatrists and therapists are needed to address the mental health crisis facing our youth and families, there is great data to support the value of peer support and coaching to facilitate recovery.

### **CARING FOR CHILDREN WITH MULTIPLE NEEDS**

Over the past decade, our state has lost treatment capacity for serving children, which has resulted in increased utilization of out-of-state placements, a misuse of state resources, and increased risk for children. According to DCF data, more than 400 youth have been placed out of state since 2014, negatively impacting children and resulting in millions in county expenditures. The lack of capacity to provide the right service at the right time has pushed children into hospitals, detention centers, and county offices. Other states are facing intervention from the federal government for failing to appropriately serve children with mental health challenges and intellectual/developmental disabilities. Wisconsin is at risk of similar action. Many services are funded on a fee-for-service structure, which imposes excessive financial risk on providers, leaving agencies financially fragile. Meanwhile, rates of youth mental and behavioral health struggles are on the rise, which further stresses the full continuum of care.

Our continuum of care for children needs state investment to reduce inequities and support timely access to supports. Specifically state expenditures to support sustainable Medicaid rates for providers serving children and parents with disabilities and/or mental health needs are critical. In addition, the state should become a foundational funder for the state's residential treatment network and authorize the addition of a new level of care by approving formation of psychiatric residential treatment facilities (PRTF).

**Message:** Providers are committed to serving children and families who are facing more acute/intensive needs. When we wrap resources around families we can partner with them to step children up to higher level supports and step them back down into home and community when their situation is stabilized. We need all parts of the continuum to support our children and that includes the addition of a Wisconsin-based PRTF. If you are a residential provider, offer a tour of your campus and a chance to visit with some of the youth/families that you are serving. Share information on successes and talk about some of the children that you don't have the capacity to support and what it would take to care for them. Connect the work that you are doing in your residential with your work in the community in outpatient, schools, CCS, etc. and talk about how the pieces fit together to support youth. Explain how the daily rate funding system places strain on your operations. Government is your only payment source – there is little to no private pay because health insurance doesn't provide parity coverage for this care.

This session Wisconsin has an opportunity to recommit to fair financing of vital family and community supports. With smart investments, we can transition to more preventative, cost-effective services that produce better outcomes and deliver long term dividends for our state.

When we enable our behavioral health, child welfare and human services sector to more rapidly respond to the demand for community-based, in-home, and intensive services, we increase community safety, reduce the need for crisis response, and change the trajectory for individuals. Ensuring people receive the right service, when and where they need it, will have a positive impact on our workforce, our children and families, and our economy. It is with that knowledge in mind that WAFCA recommends the following priorities for the 2025-26 legislative session.

### **Investing in Prevention and Early Intervention**

WAFCA supports key investments that empower families and strengthen the human services ecosystem across the private and public sector. We know that family economic supports, such as workforce housing, high quality childcare, EITC and extension of Medicaid postpartum coverage directly impact family stability. Research has shown that as states increase their investment in economic supports for families, child welfare system referrals are reduced. Early intervention priorities include:

- Evidence-Based Home Visiting
- Family Resource Centers and Early Care Mental Health Consultation
- Sustainable School-Based Mental Health

### **Strengthening Services and Support for Children**

We do not currently have a system capable of responding timely and sufficiently to the needs of children and their families. This results in delayed or denied access to services and sometimes placement outside of the state. For Wisconsin's children with particularly intensive needs including complex trauma, cognitive and developmental delays, and persistent mental health challenges, the inability to respond with the right resource can exacerbate their conditions as they move from care setting to care setting awaiting an opening in a service that can best serve them. Supporting children and families with complex needs means:

- Financial and Service Supports for Kin and Foster Care and Expansion of Intensive Foster Care
- Foundational Funding for Residential Treatment and Youth Crisis Stabilization
- Creating a Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility
- Ensuring Equity in Crisis and Community Support Program Services across the state
- Resources for Youth Justice Reforms and Returning 17-Year-Olds to the Youth System

### **Growing Our Future Workforce to Support Mental Health and Wellbeing**

The current mental health crisis is also an opportunity to expand career pathways for a wider array of caregivers and helping professions and to recognize the range of professionals who make critical contributions to the wellbeing of individuals, children, and families. Behavioral health and human services careers will become more attractive and more competitive as we continue to evolve our technology and operational infrastructure to increase worker satisfaction and reduce burnout and turnover. Priorities include:

- Increasing Medicaid Rates, especially for Behavioral Health Providers Disproportionately Serving MA Clients
- Grants to Support Qualified Treatment Trainees
- Private Insurance and Medicaid Funding for Peer Specialists and Qualified Treatment Trainees
- DSPS Capacity to Support Licensed Professionals



**WAFCA is a statewide network of non-profit and for-profit providers of human services supporting member agencies in their missions to improve the lives of individuals, families and children in Wisconsin.** Our member agencies provide a wide array of prevention and supportive services such as foster care, in-home support, counseling, and mental health treatment. We advocate for our members and the more 200,000 individuals and families that they impact each year.



## Our WAFCA Network

Promoting supportive policy for children and families

Fostering system Improvements and quality services

Connecting member agencies and human services leaders

Advancing impactful public/private partnerships

- Employing 6000 professionals
- Supporting public sector
- Responding to community

## Funding

- 80% Government/Medicaid
- 20% Philanthropy/private insurance

## WAFCA MEMBERS SUPPORT ALL REGIONS OF THE STATE

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- A Helping Heart, Inc.
  - Access Community Therapies
  - Advocates for Healthy Living
  - Anu Family Services
  - Aurora Family Service
  - Avenues Counseling
  - Bethany Christian Services
  - Canopy Center
  - Catalpa
  - Catholic Charities of Green Bay
  - Catholic Charities of Madison
  - Catholic Charities of Milwaukee
  - Center for Behavioral Medicine
  - Children's Wisconsin
  - Chileda
  - Coalition for Children, Youth & Families
  - Community Care Resources
  - Derrick's House
  - Family & Children's Center
  - Family Service of Waukesha
  - Family Services of Northeast Wisconsin
  - Family Works Programs, Inc.
  - Foundations Counseling Center
  - Foundations Health & Wholeness
  - Genesee Lake School – A MyPath Company
  - Golden Vibes
  - Journey Mental Health Center
  - Lad Lake, Inc.
  - Lutheran Social Services of WI and Upper MI
  - Monroe County Sheltercare
  - Navarro Professional Counseling Services
  - Norris
  - Northwest Counseling & Guidance Clinic
  - Northwest Passage
  - Oregon Mental Health Services
  - Orion Family Services, Inc.
  - Positive Alternatives, Inc.
  - Prentice House, Inc.
  - Rawhide Youth Services
  - Revive Youth & Family Services
  - RISE Wisconsin
  - The Production Farm
  - Samaritan Counseling
  - THRIVE Treatment Services
  - Tomorrow's Children
  - Vibrations Mental Health
  - Wellpoint Care Network

partnering to improve lives

### Child & Family Services

- Adoption/Post-Adoption Supports
- Birth Parent Services
- Birth to Three Services
- Case Management
- Domestic Violence Programs
- Early Childhood
- Educational Programs
- Family Resource Centers
- Foster Care/Treatment Foster Care
- Group Care & Treatment
- Home Visiting
- Independent Living
- Long Term Support
- Parent Programs
- Refugee Services
- Runaway Programs
- Youth Justice
- Youth Services

### Behavioral Health Services

- Autism Spectrum Services
- Comprehensive Community Svc
- Crisis Intervention
- Day Treatment
- Employee Assistance Programs
- Family Therapy
- Group Therapy
- Individual Counseling
- Infant Mental Health
- In-Home Treatment
- Outpatient Mental Health Therapy
- Prevention Programs
- Residential Treatment
- School-based Mental Health
- Substance Use Treatment

## Wisconsin Association of Family & Children's Agencies

Kathy Markeland, Executive Director, [kmarkeland@wafca.org](mailto:kmarkeland@wafca.org)  
 Emily Coddington, Associate Director, [ecoddington@wafca.org](mailto:ecoddington@wafca.org)  
 PO Box 14663 | Madison WI 53708 | 608.257.5939 | [wafca.org](http://wafca.org)