



TO: The Honorable Members of the Joint Committee on Finance

FROM: Kathy Markeland, Executive Director

DATE: April 28, 2021

RE: Support for Initiatives in the 2021-23 Biennial Budget

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On behalf of the Wisconsin Association of Family & Children's Agencies, thank you for the opportunity to share our support for initiatives in the 2021-2023 Biennial Budget.

WAFCA is a statewide association that represents over forty child and family serving agencies, and advocates for the more than 200,000 individuals and families they serve each year. Our members' services include foster care programs; shelters, group homes, and residential care centers; crisis intervention; outpatient mental health therapy; and individual, family and group counseling, among others. As partners in the state's continuum of care, WAFCA members are committed to providing quality, effective treatment services, partnering with individuals to achieve their full potential.

WAFCA supports several key investments in the Governor's proposed budget to lift up families and strengthen the human services ecosystem across the private and public sector. This is a critical year of recovery for our state which will require continued focus on mental health services and access, while also preparing our systems for implementation of the federal Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA). Cognizant of these challenges and opportunities, we would like to voice our support for the following initiatives in the Department of Health Services, the Department of Children and Families, the Department of Public Instruction and the Department of Safety and Professional Services.

#### **DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES**

**Medicaid Expansion.** The adoption of Medicaid expansion to extend coverage for adults up to 138% of not only increases health care access among childless adults but also qualifies more parents to enroll in coverage which has been shown to increase child enrollment – thus stabilizing care for the whole family. Accessing additional federal revenue for Wisconsin's Medicaid program would support important services statewide including increased rates for mental health and substance use treatment, payment for room and board in residential substance use treatment services, improved crisis services and elimination of the Children's Long Term Support waiting list among other benefits.

**Medicaid mental health and substance use treatment rates.** WAFCA member agencies serve a disproportionate share of the Medicaid eligible population. It is difficult to compete for qualified therapists when treatment rates fall short of costs. The budget proposal to provide a 40% increase in Medicaid mental health and substance use treatment rates will move payment closer to reimbursement of costs and improve the capacity of providers to serve Medicaid eligible children and families.

**Medicaid-funded day treatment services for children and adolescents.** Day treatment services help to stabilize youth in their home community and prevent costly hospitalizations and out-of-home placements. More than 75% of children in WAFCA member agency day treatment programs are Medicaid funded and the day treatment rate for adolescents has not increased since 2009. The proposed 40% increase in funding to support higher rates will help to stabilize programs and ensure access to day treatment services into the future.

**Clinical Supervision Grants for Mental Health Treatment Trainees.** The proposed budget sustains this program at its current funding level of \$500,000 annually. With a continuing shortage in the behavioral health services providers and demand for services increasing significantly especially in the last year, WAFCA supports expanding this important investment in the development of our mental health workforce to \$1 million annually.

## **DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

**Foster and Relative Caregivers.** Wisconsin has a strong record of connecting children with relative caregivers when they are in need of out-of-home placement. The budget proposal to increase foster care rates and kinship care rates along with other supports for these caregivers will expand placement options and increase stability for children.

**Qualified Residential Treatment Providers (QRTP).** WAFCA supports budget proposals to support congregate care providers as they adopt program changes to meet new QRTP certification standards including:

*Nursing services and certification:* \$377,800 to support 24/7 nursing consultations.

*Grant for Specialized Services to Return Children from Out-of-State Placements:* \$1.3 million to establish program targeted to serve system-involved youth with complex treatment needs. WAFCA has long advocated for a more intensive treatment option for youth and state partnership is needed to support the appropriate level of clinical and trauma supports for these youth.

*Congregate Care Provider Training:* \$200,000 to support training for youth care workers.

**In-home Prevention Services.** As the state moves forward with FFPSA implementation this year, WAFCA providers stand ready to adopt service adjustments and are eager to participate in system transformations that will support more children staying safely at home and reduce the need for out-of-home placement. In order to pivot to new services, counties and providers need new state investments in evidence-based and supportive services for parents, caregivers and children. WAFCA supports the budget proposal to provide \$24 million over the biennium to expand community-based services across the state.

**Youth in Foster Care.** There are a number of challenges that youth in care face when they are seeking to obtain a driver's license. The budget initiative allocating \$292,500 to support access to driver's education would begin to reduce some of the barriers.

**Independent Living.** Research shows the value of supporting youth past the age of 21; therefore, we support the budget proposal to expand eligibility for independent living services to include a broader range of youth from ages 16-23.

**Raise the Age.** The budget provides youth aids funding to counties to support the return of 17-year-olds to the youth justice system to continue growing community-based services and solutions that support treatment and restoration for youth, their families and their communities. WAFCA supports raising the age to bring Wisconsin's youth justice policy in alignment with best practice and current knowledge regarding youth brain development and effective interventions.

## DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

**School-Based Mental Health Services Collaboration Grants.** School-based mental health services emerged as an even more valuable resource during the pandemic as providers shifted to telehealth services and continued to collaborate with staff and teachers to address increased levels of anxiety and depression among students. The proposed increase in this important grant program to \$10 million annually will enable additional schools to participate while providing some sustaining resources for established programs.

## DEPARTMENT OF SAFETY AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

**Professional Licensing and Regulation of Staff.** WAFCA supports the proposed increase in full-time staffing positions at DSPS. The agency is currently under-staffed, and agencies and professionals are experiencing costly delays awaiting licensure approvals for staff to support critical mental health services. These are program revenue funded positions and the sector is prepared to pay for a higher level of customer support.

## OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER OF INSURANCE

**Telehealth Coverage Parity.** WAFCA supports proposals to require insurers to extend health care coverage for services delivered via telehealth when those services are functionally equivalent to in-person services. Countless individuals have benefitted from remote behavioral health services over the past year and providers have been able to expand access to underserved regions. The budget builds on this success by mandating parity coverage.

Thank you for your continued service to our state especially at this critical time. We are grateful for your support for our essential human services sector and look forward to providing further information and resources as you continue in your work to formulate a state budget that moves Wisconsin forward.