

Raising Wisconsin

Optimal Health and Well-Being 2023-25 State Budget Request

Raising Wisconsin calls for the state Legislature to prioritize children's health and well-being in the **2023-25 biennium by supporting young children's mental health, the expansion of Family Foundations Home Visiting Programs, and the extension of Medicaid coverage to 12 months in the postpartum period.**

We cannot afford inaction because investments in the earliest years have resounding returns long into adulthood. Action is especially critical now as we look to emerge from the devastating effects of the pandemic, which exacerbated mental and physical health challenges for young children and families. Raising Wisconsin is requesting **\$8.79 million in the 2023-25 state biennial budget for children's mental health to support and enhance training and coaching, Infant Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC), and endorsement work.** This investment will allow more children to receive mental health services.

Many people, including Wisconsin policymakers, mistakenly assume infants and young children cannot experience mental health challenges because they are too young. However, many factors contribute to these challenges for infants and young children – from medical and developmental disorders to exposure to adversity, including trauma or stress from domestic and community violence or living in poverty. When left untreated, mental health challenges can take root early, worsen over time, and prompt potentially serious consequences for early learning, social competence, including challenging behaviors, and lifelong health. In fact, a recent study found child care providers reported young children were exhibiting 64 percent more externalizing behaviors, like aggression and bullying, and 63 percent more internalizing behaviors like anxiety, depression, or social withdrawal.

Investing in early childhood mental health may decrease long-term economic consequences created by negative educational experiences. We know challenging behaviors are cited as the No. 1 reason children and families are asked to leave a child care program, where they receive high-quality care and education that fosters their healthy development now and into adulthood. Studies indicate children who are expelled from early childhood settings are more likely to be expelled during middle and high school and are less likely to graduate, causing them to be less productive members of society as adults and increasing economic costs.

Additionally, it is imperative to support expectant mothers and new mothers in their postpartum period to help infants, young children, and their families thrive. To support that goal, Raising Wisconsin requests **\$10 million for the expansion of Family Foundations Home Visiting Program** to serve additional counties and increase the number of home visitors. This evidence-based and completely voluntary service links pregnant women with prenatal care, and new mothers receive tools to promote strong parent-child attachment and activities, which foster their child's development and their role as their first and most important teacher. In the long-term, home visiting has proven to foster educational development and school-readiness and play a role in preventing child abuse and neglect.

Raising Wisconsin also calls for **the extension of Medicaid coverage to 12 months after the birth of an infant** because access to postpartum coverage improves the health of young children by improving and protecting the health of new mothers. In particular, the continued infant mortality crisis underscores the need to extend coverage. While the last state budget extended postpartum care to 90 days, it is not sufficient to meet the maternal and infant health crisis in Wisconsin, where there are unacceptable rates of infant mortality for babies of color. Black babies are three times more likely to die before their first birthday than white babies. Medicaid extension reduces maternal and infant mortality and decreases uninsured rates for pregnant and new mothers.

Additionally, the expansion of home visiting programs and Medicaid extension can help mitigate the societal costs of premature and low birth weight babies. As one of the leading causes of infant mortality and childhood disability, premature and low birth weight are estimated to have a cost of \$65,000 in addition to the emotional challenges of losing a child in their first year of life. Both programs ensure mothers have the care they need to give them and their babies the best and healthiest possible start.

Wisconsin policymakers have a significant opportunity to improve the lives of babies, young children, families, and the social and economic health of our communities by investing in these critical supports. Funding levels must match the critical importance of mental health, social and emotional supports, and optimal health and well-being to ensure strong Wisconsin children and families now and long into the future.