

Healthwatch Wisconsin: Report birth cost recovery is not child support

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Madison, WI – On December 6, HealthWatch Wisconsin, Inc. (HWW), partnered with ABC for Health, Inc., a Wisconsin based public interest law firm, to release a new Pulse Report: Birth Cost Recovery: It's Not Child Support. The report is now available at HealthWatchWisconsin.org.

The report identified that Wisconsin is one of the very few states to require unmarried, absent parents to repay Medicaid related birth costs. In contrast to traditional child support payments, Birth Cost Recovery (BCR) repayments do not support families or children, but rather support child support offices. Most states abandoned the practice of BCR or never implemented it due to the harmful impact upon children and families. Atty. Bobby Peterson, Executive Director at ABC for Health noted, "Infamously, Wisconsin leads the country in BCR recoveries and sticks out like a sore thumb."

Between 2011 and 2016, Wisconsin collected nearly \$106 million in BCR judgements from absent parents, usually unmarried fathers. Unlike child support, the collected funds do not support Medicaid eligible moms and infants in need—instead \$16 million went to county Child Support Agencies, with the remainder to state and federal agencies.

The Pulse Report identifies that BCR may negatively affect birth outcomes in Wisconsin. Moreover, the investigation identified evidence that BCR policy in Wisconsin systemically hinders statewide efforts to promote positive birth outcomes and reduce infant mortality. The policy, that disproportionately impacts racial minorities, also drives families further into poverty, and discourages unmarried fathers to play a supportive role in their children's lives.

"It requires no exercise of imagination to correlate the chilling effect of BCR policy

upon unmarried pregnant women who may delay prenatal care and suffer a higher risk of adverse birth outcomes,” notes Peterson. For years, HWW and ABC for Health, advocated to eliminate or systemically change the pernicious practice of BCR judgements in Wisconsin.

In the last several months, a team of advocates, volunteers, and lawyers joined forces to challenge the practice of BCR and advocate for a change in policy to conform more closely to the rest of the country. To accompany the report, HealthWatch Wisconsin also published a Birth Cost Recovery Research Directory, to serve as a repository of additional research, resources, and more.