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Kids Forward: Systemic solutions are required to address pandemic's devastating impact on children and families

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MADISON, Wisconsin — America's children are in crisis," said Annie E. Casey Foundation President and CEO Lisa Hamilton. "All across the country, families with children are struggling to overcome an unprecedented convergence of emergencies. We need immediate and decisive action from policymakers that prioritizes equitable solutions to help families survive this catastrophe."

Families are struggling in their efforts to meet their children's everyday needs during the COVID-19 pandemic while managing increasingly unstable finances, school, work, and mental health, according to a new policy report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Kids, Families and COVID-19: Pandemic Pain Points and the Urgent Need to Respond details the significant and unimaginable strain on children and families from this global health crisis.

The U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse survey from mid-September to mid-October 2020 identified four key areas of impact on children and families: food security, housing stability, health insurance status, and mental health indicators. These areas require both immediate action for relief and bold, long-term thinking for sustained recovery. Key findings from Wisconsin respondents with children living in their household include:

- Nearly one in eight (13%) reported that there was not enough to eat in their household in the last week, sometimes or always.

- Over one in seven (14%) reported their confidence in making their next rent or mortgage payment on time was slight or none.

- One in eleven (9%) reported that they had no health insurance

- Over one in 5 (21%) reported that they had felt down, depressed or hopeless in the last week).

Even before the pandemic hit, over 13 million U.S. children lived in poverty, and 4 million lacked health insurance. Results from the annual KIDS COUNT® Data Book last June revealed a concerning picture for Wisconsin's children, especially for our African American children: 42% lived in poverty, 51% lived in families with parents lacking secure employment, and 51% lived in families spending over thirty percent of their income on housing. Economic indicators were commonly three to four times more severe for African American children and families in our state than for white children and families. As the effects of the pandemic on employment, income, and housing ripple out across our state, the impact of this crisis will not be felt equally across all families, but will fall harder on those who were already struggling.

If the trends shown in this report continue, the next year could deliver worsening poverty, homelessness, illness, and death across our state. However, 2021 is also when Wisconsin will be deciding its state budget for the next two years. The Pandemic report urges states to examine policies and legislation that left thousands in Wisconsin and other states suffering before COVID-19 ever arrived. We must discard barriers that have kept families from thriving and fundamentally re-imagine education and child care, restore funding to our inadequate public assistance programs, and restructure our economic policies to help every family to thrive.

"Burnout on the vastness of this crisis is very real," Erica Nelson, Race to Equity and Kids Count Project Director explained, "but there are strategies to end this suffering.

Effective solutions exist, and we must be persistent, putting one foot in front of the other toward implementing transformational policies that recreate, reform, and renew our state."

Kids Forward calls on state and federal policymakers to prioritize the needs of Wisconsin's communities of color in recovery plans and advocate for the following:

Economics

- Reform unemployment insurance (UI) to cover all workers, replace the antiquated computer system that runs the UI program, and streamline the process for receiving benefits.
- Increase the minimum wage to a family-supporting level of at least $15 an hour, and establish a method for it to be automatically adjusted each year for the cost of living.
- Require businesses to provide paid sick leave and family leave.
- Extend the eviction moratorium, expand renters' rights, and freeze mortgage payments.
- Strengthen a tax credit that enables homeowners on fixed incomes and people earning low wages to stay in their homes.
- Expand the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) to combat poverty for children and families.

Health

- Expand BadgerCare and add more options and flexibility for mental health

care.

- Eliminate unnecessary barriers to health care and other public assistance programs that make it more difficult for families to receive urgently needed support.

- Ensure equitable statewide access to COVID-19 testing, health care, and vaccines.

Education

- Increase broadband across the state to ensure equal access to education and employment opportunities.

- Support strong schools, and make sure they have the resources to safely educate children and address racial gaps in academic opportunity.

- . Increase investment in the child care industry and workforce and eliminate disparities in access to quality early education.

The next few months will be critical for families. Immediate state and federal COVID-19 relief packages are needed for both individuals and small businesses as we work to craft long-term policy solutions supporting every child, every family, and every community in Wisconsin.

Release Information
The Kids, Families and COVID-19: Pandemic Pain Points and a Roadmap for Recovery will be available December 14 at 12:01 a.m. ET at https://www.aecf.org/-resources/kids-families-and-covid-19/. Additional information is available at https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data#WI/2/0/char/0/271

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About Kids Forward
Kids Forward advocates for effective, long-lasting solutions that break down barriers to success for children and families in Wisconsin. Using research and a community-informed approach, Kids Forward works to help every kid, every family, and every community thrive.

About the Annie E. Casey Foundation
The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit www.aecf.org.