

# **Board for People with Developmental Disabilities: Governor's budget includes critical investments for people with disabilities, family caregivers**

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The Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities (BPDD) commends the Governor's strong investments to strengthen care infrastructure, non-driver transportation, internet access, safe affordable housing, and quality public education. Investment in these core areas create livable communities for everyone.

"Many people with disabilities and family caregivers are struggling to maintain their independence, jobs and even continuing to live in the communities they love," said Beth Swedeen, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities. "Faced with an unrelenting shortage of caregivers, these investments come at a critical time for people with disabilities."

Care infrastructure is essential to keep family caregivers and people with disabilities in the workforce. Two out of three family caregivers are leaving the workforce entirely or must cut down to part time hours, often sacrificing employee sponsored health care, retirement, and limiting lifetime earnings.

The Governor's proposal allows full-time working family caregivers to take up to 12 weeks of paid Family Medical Leave when they need it and lets a wider circle of family members contribute their time to take care of relatives.

“The ability to take paid time off can mean the difference between returning to a job or leaving the workforce entirely,” said Swedeen. “Siblings, grandchildren, grandparents...all family should be able to take care of their family and use Family Medical Leave to do it.”

The proposed Caregiver Tax credit lets family caregivers recoup some of the out-of-pocket costs they take on when providing care and increasing funding for respite makes sure caregivers can have a break.

The Governor’s budget also provides money to increase the wages of paid direct support and personal care workers who many people with disabilities rely on to get out of bed, stay clean, and eat.

“These workers are literally the difference between living in your own home or a nursing home,” said Swedeen. “They are skilled professionals who are responsible for health and intimate personal cares, and we need to pay them well for the vital jobs they do.”

People with disabilities’ path to successful productive lives in the community are founded in quality public education that meets the needs of all students, including those with disabilities. BPDD supports the Governor’s substantial proposed increases to general school aids because students with disabilities are general education students first, and more funds help with things like smaller class sizes, adequate funding for social workers, nurses, psychologists, etc.

“We also are thrilled with the Governor’s proposal significantly increase the special education categorical aid reimbursement to 60% as well as the increases to high-cost special education aid,” said Swedeen. “Adequate funding for special education benefits all kids.”

Addressing non-driver transportation is a pressing need. The Governor’s proposal to build on the existing backbone of mass transit and improving the ability for transit to cross county and municipal boundaries is an important first step. 31 percent of Wisconsin citizens are non-drivers. Non-drivers are a large and growing group that includes low-income workers who don’t own or have access to a car, people with disabilities, older adults, adults without drivers’ licenses, and people under age 16.

“When you are or become a non-driver, it impacts everything you do,” said Swedeen. “Where you can live and work, whether you can get to health care

appointments. Can you get where you need to go on your schedule? If you are a non-driver, the answer is likely ‘no.’”

Broadband is critical infrastructure for people with disabilities and families.

“Access to broadband has become a limiting factor for Telehealth, the ability to use technology to increase independence and reduce the tasks paid staff must complete, and remote employment opportunities for family caregivers and people with disabilities,” said Swedeen. “Wisconsin needs affordable internet connectivity for all.”

BPDD applauds the Governor’s attention to lead poisoning and response, and efforts to make housing affordable and safe from lead hazards. Wisconsin is among the top ten states for lead poisoning in children. An estimated 35% of Wisconsin children are at risk of lead poisoning across the state.

“Lead poisoning is a 100% preventable cause of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities,” said Swedeen. “It’s time to address the lead paint and pipes that are the source of needless poisoning.”

BPDD appreciates inclusion of other important disability items including: funding for the Children’s Long Term Care Support waiver so no children are left waiting for care; increased funding for Adult Protective Services and Caregiver Quality staff to improve investigation and response to rising cases of abuse and neglect of people with disabilities; funding to continue implementing recommendations from the Caregiver Task Force; funding for ADRCs to expand caregiver support services; and implementing a Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) program, which lets people who acquire a disability before age 46 set up tax exempt savings accounts to pay qualified expenses for an individual with disabilities, including education, housing and transportation costs.

BPDD looks forward to continuing to work with the Governor’s office and the Legislature on improvements that will help voters with disabilities—many of whom are non-drivers and or rely on family or paid caregivers for access to the community—exercise the right to vote.

BPDD will prepare detailed analysis of disability priorities reflected in the Governor’s proposed budget in the coming days.