

# Dept. of Administration: Evers Administration spotlights solutions for workforce, mental health challenges at Friendship Circle roundtable

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**Fox Point, Wis.** – Wisconsin Department of Administration (DOA) Secretary Kathy Blumenfeld, Department of Workforce Development (DWD) Secretary-designee Amy Pechacek, and Department of Health Services (DHS) Assistant Deputy Secretary Sarah Valencia today joined with officials from the Friendship Circle of Wisconsin for a roundtable discussion centered on removing employment barriers for individuals with disabilities and promoting critical mental health trainings for Wisconsinites. The secretaries met with Friendship Circle Executive Director Levi Stein, staff, board members, and area stakeholders for a robust discussion that highlighted Friendship Circle programs as well initiatives from Gov. Tony Evers to address the state's workforce needs and expand access to mental and behavioral health services.

“Workforce development and mental health care are among our state’s most pressing challenges right now,” Secretary Blumenfeld said. “It was heartening to learn how Friendship Circle is meeting both of those challenges with dedication, resourcefulness, and empathy. As a provider of vital services, they are doing their part to serve those in need; as a state, we must do ours to bolster our workforce and expand access to mental health care.”



*First row, from left, Terry Miller, Employment Training Program (ETP) Educational Director for Friendship Circle; Wisconsin Department of Administration (DOA) Secretary Kathy Blumenfeld; Department of Workforce Development (DWD) Secretary-designee Amy Pechacek; Shira Miller, ETP Graduate and Barista of Friendship Circle; Tegan Budig, Media Relations for Friendship Circle; Leah Stein, Friendship Circle Chief Operating Officer; and Levi Stein, Friendship Circle Executive Director. Second row, from left: Sandy Saltzstein, chief of staff for Rep. Deb Andraca; Department of Health Services (DHS) Assistant Deputy Secretary Sarah Valencia; Wendy Schmidt, Director of Employment Services for Down Syndrome Association of Wisconsin; Jeff Langer, the Friendship Circle Board Member; Eva Antonoff, U Matter Teen Board Member; Kris Rick, the Charles E. Kubly Foundation Executive Director; and Chrissie Pappas, ETP Manager for Friendship Circle.*

“Wisconsin’s record low unemployment rate and record high number of jobs mean it’s more important than ever to help everyone reach their employment potential,” said DWD Secretary-designee Amy Pechacek. “During 2022, the Department of Workforce Development helped nearly 3,500 people with disabilities get a job or get a better job through the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. We are excited to learn more about the work of Friendship Circle in advancing opportunities for people with disabilities as we work to assist employers eager to connect with this hidden

talent.”

“It is moving to hear directly from those who are helping to make our state a better place for all Wisconsinites. We know the past few years have been tough, and appreciate the work being done by partners like Friendship Circle to ensure our most vulnerable have access to mental health treatment and employment,” said Sarah Valencia, DHS Assistant Deputy Secretary. “The two are connected. And it will take all of us working together to eliminate challenges, strengthen equity, and build healthy communities to allow everyone to live their best lives.”

Workforce development and expanding access to mental health are paramount issues for the Evers administration. Gov. Evers has declared 2023 as the “Year of Mental Health” and has called for more than \$500 million to expand access to mental health and behavioral healthcare in his 2023-25 budget.

Gov. Evers has also called for targeted workforce investments in industries hit hard by the pandemic and has proposed a \$100 million investment into the successful [Workforce Innovation Grant program](#), which invests in locally-based workforce solutions.

A nonprofit organization based in Fox Point, Friendship Circle furnishes assistance and support to 3,000 individuals and volunteers with special needs and their families. It also renders support to individuals and families struggling with isolation, addiction, and other family-related crises. Today’s roundtable spotlighted two of the nonprofit’s programs in the areas of workforce development and mental health. Under one initiative, adults with disabilities undergo training for essential soft skills that can be applied to multiple occupations; Friendship Circle then helps connect its graduates with [area employers](#). In a separate program, Friendship Circle conducts suicide prevention workshops that [train participants](#) to recognize signs of suicide in someone and connect them with available help.

“Strengthening our community requires that we come together to support and find solutions for everyone to be able to participate in our economy and society at large,” said Rabbi Levi Stein, Friendship Circle executive director. “I’m grateful to be able to share our critical work with the Evers Administration, and hope it can serve as a model for helping people thrive across Wisconsin.”