

Disability Rights Wisconsin: Budget reflects progress and missed opportunities on mental health

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The need for increased access to community-based mental health services is acute in every one of Wisconsin's 72 counties. While the state budget motions approved by the Joint Finance Committee (JFC) include some positive investments in mental health, there are also many missed opportunities. As the Protection and Advocacy system for people with disabilities, Disability Rights Wisconsin urges legislators to prioritize mental health and take further action to improve access and save lives and dollars.

Limited access to community based mental health care has resulted in youth and adults with mental health needs being placed in costly out of home and institutional settings or confined in jails or prisons. 59 of Wisconsin's 72 counties are designated as "mental health professional shortage areas". Access to mental health care is especially challenging for people covered by Medicaid, and extremely severe in rural areas.

Mental Illness and the Justice System

Conservative estimates suggest that over 50% of the prison and jail population have a history of mental illness and/or substance abuse. A high percentage of youth in the juvenile justice system have mental health conditions and/or other disabilities.

DRW is concerned that funding was not approved for the 114 positions at the Mendota Juvenile Treatment Center (MJTC). "The youth that come to MJTC have significant mental health and special education needs that must be addressed with

robust programming; these services cannot be provided without adequate staffing,” stated Supervising Advocacy Specialist Phyllis Greenberger. “The expansion for the physical building is already underway and it is critical to adequately staff the programming for the youth that will be placed at this facility.”

The Opening Avenues to Reentry Success (OARS) program reduces recidivism by supporting people with mental illness returning to the community with wraparound re-entry support including case management, assistance with housing, psychiatric treatment, and medication. OARS is currently available in 51 counties. Under the motion that passed JFC, the Department of Corrections (DOC) can add roughly 48 OARS participants in FY24 and another 47 participants in FY25. While a good step forward, it’s disappointing that the motion did not fully address this need; this is only 50% of the unserved and eligible population.

Community Based Mental Health Services

“At a time when the mental health needs in our state are so grave, the Joint Finance Committee did not act on key opportunities to invest in community services and prevention,” stated Barbara Beckert, DRW Director of External Advocacy. DRW is concerned that the budget did not fund the following and hopes Legislators will provide support for these essential programs in standalone bills:

- Covering the nonfederal share of the Medicaid Community Support Program which is currently funded by counties.
- Support to develop two additional peer recovery centers to expand access to areas not served by existing centers.
- Funding to support the peer-run respite center for veterans.
- Suicide prevention grant program.
- Behavioral health treatment program for individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deaf-blind.
- Expansion of the Mental Health Consultation Program to address the shortage of psychiatrists.

Crisis Services

The budget approved by JFC once again includes a ten-million-dollar appropriation for Crisis Urgent Care and Observation facilities, to serve people experiencing a mental health crisis closer to home. These centers provide an alternative to the current practice in which law enforcement transport individuals experiencing a

mental health crisis to Winnebago Mental Health Institute, far from their home and support system. DRW asks policy makers to release these funds as soon as possible; JFC never released funds appropriated in the 2021 - 2023 biennial budget for these services.

Mental Health Services in Schools

DRW commends the increased funding for school mental health approved by JFC; however, additional budget proposals for school based mental health were not advanced by Joint Finance. Wisconsin's schools are understaffed in the area of pupil services, where many student mental health needs can be addressed. In addition to social workers, pupil services aid should include professionals such as nurses, school psychologists and counselors. We encourage the Legislature to address the work force shortage by advancing these changes.

Wisconsin has a proud tradition of bipartisan support for mental health services. While commending some positive investments approved by JFC, we ask policy makers to come together and prioritize additional action to support funding and policy changes that invest in community based mental health services. For additional information, see DRW's 2023-2025 Biennial Budget and Policy Priorities for Wisconsinites with Disabilities ([accessible PDF](#)).