

# Gov. Evers: Takes action on two bills

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MADISON — Gov. Tony Evers today signed Assembly Bill 67, now 2023 Wisconsin Act 2, which eliminates the sunset date for Wisconsin Merit scholarships awarded to Wisconsin high school graduates who are entering their freshman year at a University of Wisconsin System institution.

“The Wisconsin Merit scholarship is the only state-funded merit-based scholarship that goes to UW System students, and since 2020 alone, this program has helped nearly 300 students afford to reach for their academic and career goals,” said Gov. Evers. “Eliminating the sunset date will ensure we can continue to support Wisconsin students and encourage our own home-grown talent to stay here in Wisconsin.”

The governor also signed Senate Bill 75, now 2023 Wisconsin Act 3, which modifies the pretrial release and bail statutes in order to implement the proposed constitutional amendment that was ratified yesterday via statewide referendum on the April 2023 ballot. In response, the governor shared the statement below.

“Yesterday, the people of Wisconsin approved a companion constitutional amendment to change our state’s bail policies, and while I’m signing this bill today consistent with the will of the people, I also want to be clear that these changes alone will not solve the challenges facing our justice system,” said Gov. Evers. “Reforming our justice system to make our communities safer must be a top priority, and I believe we can find common ground. I call on the Legislature to join me in supporting evidence-based solutions that respect and protect victims and survivors, reduce recidivism, bolster our justice system workforce, and ensure our communities have the resources they need to invest in public safety services, including police, fire, and EMS.”

The governor’s 2023-25 biennial budget includes several comprehensive, evidence-

based solutions to help stabilize and reform the state's justice system, support survivors and victims of crimes, and bolster community safety. Some of the highlights from the governor's budget initiatives, including supporting the justice system workforce, improving and expanding community supports, and investing in public safety, are available below.

## **HIGHLIGHTS FROM GOV. EVERS' 2023-25 BIENNIAL BUDGET**

### **Investing in Local Communities and Public Safety**

Gov. Evers has consistently proposed building out Wisconsin's crisis services infrastructure. Too often, unaddressed mental health crises are handled by the justice system instead of the healthcare system. To address this, the governor's 2023-25 budget proposes:

- Providing \$12.9 million to establish two forensic assertive community treatment teams, which are intended to be an intervention that bridges the behavioral health and criminal justice systems. The program is intended for individuals with a serious mental illness who are involved with the criminal justice system and is designed to improve clients' mental health outcomes, reduce recidivism, divert individuals in need of treatment away from the criminal justice system, manage costs by reducing reoccurring arrest, incarceration, and hospitalization, and increase public safety; and
- Increasing access to crisis services by providing more than \$10 million to establish up to two crisis urgent care and observation centers that will serve as regional crisis receiving and stabilization facilities, offer seamless transitions between levels of services offered at the centers, arrange for the transfer to more appropriate treatment options as needed, coordinate the connection to ongoing care, and promote the effective sharing of information between providers to improve service delivery and patient outcomes. The centers will also help alleviate a significant portion of time that law enforcement and other first responders dedicate to emergency detention cases by offering a dedicated first responder drop-off location that accepts custody of emergency detention cases and does not require that medical clearances be completed before drop-off.

### *Dedicated Public Safety Shared Revenue*

The governor's 2023-25 budget proposes historic shared revenue reform and

provides the largest increase in aid to municipalities and counties in decades. The proposal includes \$250 million in new public safety aid, which can be used to support law enforcement, fire, and EMS, as well as courts and district attorneys' offices. Municipal and county governments are the primary providers of public safety services in the state, and it is one of their largest expenditures. All municipal and county governments will be aided at the same percentage of their three-year average law enforcement, fire protection, and ambulance and emergency medical services costs. The distribution formula ensures that no government will receive less than \$10,000.

### *Investing in Law Enforcement*

In addition to the bold shared revenue funding, Gov. Evers proposes additional law enforcement-specific investments, including:

- Providing \$10 million to fund and create a grant program administered by the Wisconsin Department of Justice (DOJ) for law enforcement agencies to fund programs that recruit and retain law enforcement officers and that promote officer wellness;
- Providing \$10 million to fund and create a grant program administered by the DOJ to provide local and Tribal governments funding for community policing and community prosecution programs;
- Providing \$1,390,000 to increase funding for grants for Tribal law enforcement programs.
- Providing \$190,800 of expenditure authority to help offset overtime costs for beat patrol efforts of law enforcement;
- Providing more than \$1.7 million and 10 full-time positions at DOJ to investigate crime in the department's Division of Criminal Investigation. The positions include both special agents and criminal analysts; and
- Permitting county sheriffs and local appointing authorities to choose whether to hire noncitizens as officers as long as that person has valid employment authorization from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

### **Supporting Crime Victims and Survivors**

The governor's budget makes a series of investments to respect victim's rights, support survivors, and bolster reporting, services, and victim notification, including:

- Providing \$10 million to fund and create a grant program administered by the

- DOJ to support organizations that provide services for crime victims;
- Providing an additional \$10 million for the Sexual Assault Victim Services Grant Program;
- Providing an additional more than \$11.7 million with the goal of reimbursing counties up to 90 percent of their eligible costs associated with providing services to crime victims and witnesses;
- Converting \$817,000 of federal funds in each year and five full-time positions at the DOJ from federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funding to general purpose revenue to address a projected reduction of VOCA funding available for awards to local agencies providing services to crime victims;
- Clarifying and bolstering the duties of the Parole Commission and the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (DOC) to notify family members when a person applies for parole or is released on parole or extended supervision;
- Creating a hate crime hotline administered by DOJ to encourage victims to report hate crimes and enable law enforcement to better address hate crimes;
- Providing \$250,000 to create a grant program administered by the DOJ to promote the protection of elders and support the elder abuse hotline;
- Providing more than \$7.4 million to create the Office of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women within DOJ, which will administer a grant program, provide training, and provide services to crime victims and witnesses who are citizens of a Tribal Nation; and
- Provide more than \$40.4 million for domestic abuse grants and financial assistance for domestic abuse survivors.

### **Bolstering the Justice System Workforce**

In a historically tight labor market, the state has struggled to recruit and retain enough employees. Wisconsin's justice system, in particular, has grappled with low pay and high vacancies in recent years. Gov. Evers' 2023-25 budget provides funding to multiple portions of the justice system workforce to ensure that qualified and experienced professionals are able to tackle the very real issues facing Wisconsin.

#### *District Attorneys, State Public Defenders, Attorneys General Compensation*

The governor's budget prioritizes recruitment and retention of assistant district attorneys, assistant state public defenders, and state attorneys through the following initiatives:

- Increase the starting pay for assistant district attorneys and assistant state public defenders to \$35 per hour, an increase of \$7.76 per hour over the current starting wage;
- Provide a one-step pay progression for assistant district attorneys, deputy district attorneys, and assistant state public defenders to increase retention of experienced attorneys;
- Increase compensation for elected district attorneys, beginning with their new term in 2025; and
- Provide a one-step pay raise to continue to provide pay progression for state attorneys.

Gov. Evers' first budget, as signed into law, increased the private bar rate for the first time since 1992. The governor's 2023-25 budget further increases the private bar reimbursement rate in recognition of the continuing challenge the hourly rate provides to recruiting and retaining private bar attorneys who accept appointments.

### *Local Justice Workforce Staffing*

The governor's budget recognizes that adequately staffing the different components of the justice system is vital to ensuring reasonable caseloads, reducing burnout, and meeting constitutional protections for justice-involved individuals. The budget:

- Creates an additional 51.8 full-time assistant district attorney positions;
- Creates an additional 50 full-time positions for the State Public Defender; and
- Creates an additional four circuit court branches.

Additionally, Gov. Evers' 2023-25 budget proposal bolsters staffing at the DOJ, in part to ensure local district attorneys have the support they need, including 15 new full-time positions to help district attorneys prosecute violent crime, provide training and resources for prosecutors on sexual assault cases, assist with investigating and prosecuting drug-related offenses at the Division of Criminal Investigation's Wausau and Appleton field offices, and to increase staff at the State Crime Laboratories.

### *Improving Staffing Recruitment and Retentions in Corrections*

The governor's budget builds on initiatives over the last two years to help recruit and retain more corrections employees. The 2023-25 budget makes an

unprecedented investment in compensation to ensure that the state's secured institutions at the DOC and Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) can be adequately and safely staffed. The governor's budget includes \$346.5 million over the biennium to address critical recruitment and retention needs in these institutions, including:

- Rolling the \$4 per hour add-on for all security staff, including supervisors, into the employees' base hourly wage;
- Enhancing the pay structure for correctional officers, sergeants, psychiatric care technicians, and youth counselors;
- Increasing the existing add-on for correctional staff working in maximum security institutions from \$2 per hour to \$4 per hour and providing a \$1 per hour add-on for correctional staff working in medium security institutions is implemented;
- Continuing the \$5 per hour add-on for security staff working at correctional institutions with vacancy rates greater than 40 percent; and
- Supporting a pay progression for probation and parole agents within the DOC.

### **Other Public Safety Initiatives and Investments**

The governor is also proposing the following changes to and investments in the justice system:

- Make gun safes, barrel locks, and trigger locks sales tax exempt to encourage safe, secure, and responsible storage of firearms when they are not in use;
- Require, with certain exceptions, that any firearm transfers be done through federally licensed firearm dealers, including background checks conducted on recipients;
- Create an extreme risk protection injunction process similar to the existing domestic violence injunction for law enforcement and concerned loved ones to use where a court, after a hearing, may order an individual to refrain from possessing a firearm for up to one year if it finds by clear and convincing evidence that he or she is substantially likely to injure himself or herself or another by possessing a firearm;
- Require that courts order the use of an ignition interlock device for all offenses involving the use of alcohol and operating a motor vehicle while intoxicated;
- Provide \$1 million to reimburse counties for circuit court costs related to implementing pretrial risk assessments;
- Provide the Medical College of Wisconsin with \$10 million to support the

Wisconsin Community Safety Fund to improve the quality of life, safety, and well-being of children, youth, and families in Wisconsin through violence prevention; and

- Provide one full-time position for a violence and self-harm prevention coordinator position in the Injury and Violence Prevention Program at DHS.

## **ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND ON ENACTED LEGISLATION**

### **Assembly Bill 67, now 2023 Wisconsin Act 2:**

- Eliminates the April 1, 2023, sunset date for Wisconsin Merit scholarships awarded to Wisconsin high school graduates who are entering their freshman year at a University of Wisconsin System institution.

### **Senate Bill 75, now 2023 Wisconsin Act 3:**

- Modifies state statutes to implement the constitutional amendment and conforms certain sections of statutes with the amendment; and
- Creates a definition in statutes of “serious harm” and “violent crime.”