

For Immediate Release

July 8, 2019

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DRW Commends Key Budget Investments and Notes Unmet Needs

Disability Rights Wisconsin (DRW) thanks Governor Evers and state legislators for approving several key budget priorities for Wisconsinites with disabilities in the biennial budget.

In response to appeals from the disability community to address the direct care workforce crisis, the budget includes significant investment to increase the Medicaid Personal Care rate, as well as the Family Care direct care supplemental funding. DRW commends these important first steps in addressing the critical statewide shortage of caregivers who play such an important role in supporting people with disabilities.

In addition, children with significant disabilities and their families will benefit from funding to address the waiting list for long term supports; funding for children's long-term support services intake and screening; and expansion of the Child Psychiatry Consultation Program. Increased funding for specialized transportation will help to support independent living and community integration.

The budget also makes some incremental investments in criminal justice reform that have the potential to benefit justice involved Wisconsinites with mental illness, including expansion of the Opening Avenues to Re-entry Success (OARs) program from 44 to 51 counties.

DRW is encouraged to see these helpful investments that will have a direct positive impact on people with disabilities; however, it is discouraging to see missed opportunities to help children and adults with disabilities to have healthy, active lives as contributing members of their communities. The budget approved by the Legislature fell short by failing to make some critical investments needed by Wisconsin children and adults with disabilities and their families.

In particular, DRW remains gravely concerned about the significant erosion in education quality for children with disabilities. The first increase in special education reimbursement in ten years falls well short of what is needed to ensure our students reach their full potential, and fails to address the imbalance of the growing deficit in state funding for special education and the ever-increasing costs school districts face to educate children with disabilities.

DRW is further concerned by the failure to adequately fund school mental health services and related staff needs. The Legislature approved only \$12.5 million of the \$63 million proposed by the Governor. Additional funding would have supported hiring of the social workers, psychologists, counselors and nurses needed by to address urgent mental health needs in our public schools.

Legislators missed an opportunity to follow the lead of almost every other state by returning jurisdiction of 17-year offenders from adult to juvenile court. Missouri is the most recent state to approve legislation to raise the age of jurisdiction to 18, leaving Wisconsin as one of only 4 states to treat all 17 year-old offenders as adults.

DRW will continue to work with policy makers to advocate for additional investments in special education, mental health services, and criminal justice system reforms, and to advance expansion of Medicaid eligibility to 138% of the poverty level, which would provide Medicaid access for many more Wisconsinites, and leverage funding to expand vital healthcare services.

Disability Rights Wisconsin is the state's designated Protection and Advocacy Agency, charged with protecting the rights of individuals with disabilities and keeping individuals free from abuse and neglect.

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