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## **Disability Rights Wisconsin Applauds Positive Budget Initiatives for People with Disabilities**

Disability Rights Wisconsin, Wisconsin's Protection and Advocacy system for people with disabilities, is encouraged by the comprehensive initiatives for people with disabilities in Governor Evers' 2021-2023 Biennial Budget Proposal. "The Governor's budget shows a strong commitment to people with disabilities," stated Lea Kitz, Executive Director. "Governor Evers and Lieutenant Governor Barnes listened to people with disabilities and their families around the state and included many recommendations to enhance their lives by providing better education, supports and services, transportation, and medical and mental health care."

The Governor's Budget includes many positive provisions that will touch the lives of people with disabilities. DRW is encouraged to see the following included:

- **Increases support for caregivers:** Wisconsin has a critical caregiver workforce shortage that is about to get exponentially worse. As Wisconsin's citizens age and become more frail, we do not have a reservoir of workers in this state to care for them or for the younger people with disabilities who require care and support. The Governor's proposals to target Medicaid rate increases to personal care workers and the direct care workforce in Family Care are a down payment on addressing this looming crisis.
- **Reforms the youth justice system:** The Governor's budget recognizes that justice-involved youth have different needs than adults and opens the door to age-appropriate important education and mental health services by returning 17-year-olds to the juvenile justice system and increasing the age of delinquency to 12 years old. Underpinning this change is the funding counties will need to support this change and strategic long-term investments in a community-based youth justice system that includes closing Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake and eliminating Type 1 correctional facilities by replacing them with smaller Secure Residential Care Centers for Children and Youth.
- **Invests in mental health services,** including regional crisis centers, to support individuals in crisis to be assessed and supported closer to their home and to their natural supports; funds additional staff for county and peer-run respite center crisis phone lines; establishes a behavioral health treatment program for those who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deaf-blind to receive treatment directly from a behavioral health provider; and expands the Child Psychiatry Consultation Program statewide.
- **Invests in K-12 Education:** Over \$700 million in increases for special education aid to move from the current 29% reimbursement rate to 50% by the end of the biennium, a \$9.5 million increase for high-cost special education aid, a \$46.5 increase for pupil services funding (social workers, counselors, psychologists and nurses), and a \$7 million increase for school-based mental health services grants. Education for students with disabilities has been severely underfunded at the state level for years, and with the extra challenges of education during the pandemic, the sooner Wisconsin can properly fund education and mental health supports for our students, the more possible it will be for our students to recover and move forward.

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- **Supports children with significant disabilities:** Wisconsin has made tremendous strides in eliminating waitlists for the Children’s Long Term Support Waiver program. The Governor proposes to continue progress toward the ultimate goal of assuring this program is available to all the kids who need it.
- **Expands access to healthcare:** The Governor’s proposal to expand BadgerCare eligibility to the modest amount of 138% of the federal poverty level will allow people who cannot afford health insurance to finally get access to health care. This is particularly critical in the midst of a pandemic. At the same time, it will bring Wisconsin millions of additional federal Medicaid dollars that we desperately need. There is no downside to this.
- **Enhances Justice Reform** by expanding funding for Opening Avenues to Reentry Success program which assists individuals with mental illness to successfully return to their community after release from a correctional setting by providing access to case management, housing, psychiatric treatment, medication, and other services. There are also increases for the Treatment Alternatives Diversion grant program to help deflect individuals in need of substance use and mental health treatment from the criminal justice system.
- **Sustains access to transportation** for people with disabilities, many of whom are nondrivers, increasing general transit aids by 2.5%, and increasing funding for paratransit and specialized transit by 2.5%.
- **Addresses housing insecurity** by advancing the recommendations of the Interagency Council on Homelessness to help increase the State’s investment in the growing number of people experiencing homelessness. A high percentage are people struggling with mental illness.
- **Supports access to voting** by funding automatic voter registration to improve accessibility to the polls and to keep voting information accurate and updated.
- **Supports employment for people with disabilities** by increasing funding for Project Search, repealing the Unemployment Compensation rules that prohibit people receiving Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) from collecting unemployment compensation benefits, expanding the coverage and protections for Family Medical Leave, and adding a state Work Opportunity tax credit to enhance federal credit.

Wisconsin has a long tradition of bipartisan support for disability services. “We look forward to working with legislators to move forward these positive initiatives for Wisconsinites with disabilities,” said Kit Kerschensteiner, Director of Advocacy and Legal Services.

DRW is partnering with the Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities and The Arc Wisconsin to provide State Budget Trainings for the Disability Community around the state. Details will be posted on our website at [www.disabilityrightswi.org/](http://www.disabilityrightswi.org/)

DRW’s current legislative and budget priorities can be found here: [disabilityrightswi.org/public-policy/drw-priorities-for-the-2021-2023-biennial-budget/](http://disabilityrightswi.org/public-policy/drw-priorities-for-the-2021-2023-biennial-budget/)

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*Disability Rights Wisconsin is the federally mandated Protection and Advocacy system for the State of Wisconsin, charged with protecting the rights of individuals with disabilities and keeping individuals free from abuse and neglect.*