



WISCONSIN COUNCIL ON

**children  
& families**

Raising Voices to Make Every Kid Count

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## **2014 Policy Priorities for Wisconsin's Children and Families**

Wisconsin's state motto, "Forward," suggests a place where all families have the opportunity to thrive. For children that means growing up in a just and nurturing family and community. Investing in children is a social imperative with an economic payoff, and it is our collective responsibility to make sure all Wisconsin families have a chance to move forward. WCCF advocates for the policies and practices that are best for children and families, based on the most credible evidence available. Taken together, the following policy priorities point towards a future that fulfills the promise of our state motto.

### **Early Care and Education**

Every Wisconsin child deserves a great start; the first five years are extremely important in setting the foundation for lifetime learning and productive citizenship. Investments in early learning and development are cost effective, and yield an impressive return. They are the right thing to do for kids and a smart thing to do for economic development. We need a coherent and comprehensive early care and education system. Wisconsin should:

- Continue to implement an effective YoungStar Quality Rating and Improvement System for child care, which provides resources and incentives to help programs improve the quality of early learning.
- Increase access to affordable, high-quality early care and education services by strengthening the Wisconsin Shares subsidy program; sustaining and improving 4-year-old kindergarten, Head Start and Early Head Start; and improving services to children with disabilities.
- Design and implement policies that support Wisconsin child care providers in the fight against obesity by creating active learning environments.

### **Health Care**

Wisconsin is rightly proud to have the nation's seventh-lowest rate of uninsured residents, but our work is not done until everyone has access to quality health care. To achieve this goal, our state should:

- Maintain support for BadgerCare and continue outreach efforts to eligible but unenrolled families, while striving to minimize red tape and inefficiency in the enrollment and renewal procedures.
- Take advantage of the Medicaid option in the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which would improve access to affordable insurance coverage for low-income adults, while also saving money for state taxpayers and county human service programs.
- Work to improve public understanding of the new health insurance marketplace, and look for ways to improve implementation of that marketplace and coordination with BadgerCare.

- Use opportunities provided by the Affordable Care Act to improve access to preventive health services, particularly dental care and mental health services.

## **Budget and Revenue**

We support a balanced approach to solving Wisconsin's fiscal challenges in order to ensure that the state has sufficient resources to maintain investments that help make Wisconsin a great place to live and do business. Wisconsin should:

- Ensure that Wisconsin's public systems have the revenue they need to develop a competitive workforce and promote a high quality of life for Wisconsin's children and families. Tax cuts should be limited, and when they do occur, should primarily benefit taxpayers with the lowest incomes.
- Protect and improve the progressive elements of the income tax code, including tax credits that help working families with children lift themselves out of poverty. Eliminate tax breaks that skew the distribution of taxes by making low- and middle-income households pay a higher percentage of their income in taxes.
- Emphasize accountability in the tax code by periodically reviewing corporate tax breaks and eliminating those that aren't tied to job creation.
- Devote additional resources to collecting a greater share of the unpaid taxes owed to the state.
- Provide sufficient school aid to improve and equalize opportunity for students in all districts. Reform the aid formula to account for differences in poverty rates between districts and ensure all students get an education that enables them to learn in school and succeed in life.

## **Economic Security and Poverty Reduction**

Nearly 750,000 Wisconsinites are poor, childhood poverty is increasing faster than the national rate, and nearly half of African-American children live in poverty. Supporting families as they lift themselves out of poverty requires a two-generation approach, including access to family-supporting jobs, sustainable housing, adequate health care, and high quality early care and education. In addition to the priorities outlined above, strategies for addressing these interconnected needs include:

- Increase the minimum wage and protect living wages.
- Support the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Homestead Tax Credit.
- Strengthen the technical college and University systems and improve financial aid to help bridge the jobs gap.
- Expand the successful Transitional Jobs program.
- Engage community, faith, business, and government leaders to invest in the social and economic well-being of communities.

## **Racial Equity**

Wisconsin has some of the highest levels of racial and ethnic disparities of any state in the nation, including disparities in outcomes related to education, health, poverty, unemployment, adult incarceration, juvenile justice, and child welfare. Addressing racial disparity is essential not only for social justice, but also for economic growth, so that all sectors of Wisconsin's population are able to contribute to the state's economic vitality. We call for:

- A commitment to gather and analyze data related to disparities and to identify potential opportunities for change.
- A public commitment by state and local government, business, and nonprofit leaders to reduce disparities on key measures of child and family well-being.
- Targeted investments in economic security, health care, education, justice, and child welfare to reduce disparities.

## **Juvenile Justice**

Both kids and communities depend on the juvenile justice system to respond fairly and effectively to youthful offenders. WCCF seeks to promote system and legislative reforms that ensure youth and families receive developmentally appropriate services and supports in order to get them back on track to becoming a responsible adult. To achieve this goal Wisconsin should:

- Return jurisdiction of 17-year-olds arrested for the first time for non-violent offenses to juvenile court.
- Ensure that no youth under age 18 is confined with adults prior to conviction.
- Provide resources to gather uniform data, including race and ethnicity, on a statewide basis about the juvenile justice process and youthful offenders in order to ensure fairness and evaluate effectiveness.
- Focus increased investments on system improvement strategies that build the capacity of counties and others working with youthful offenders and their families to deliver cost-effective, community-based services.

## **Child Safety**

Every child deserves to live in a safe home and community, free from danger to their health and well-being. To better protect children, we should:

- Safely decrease the number of children in foster care through increased focus on maltreatment prevention, placement stability, and permanency.
- Improve services and outcomes for children who age out of the system without a permanent living arrangement.