



Reimagine Wisconsin

Kids Forward's 2025 Budget Priorities

As of January 8, 2025

Reimagine Wisconsin is the antiracist, community-informed policy agenda of Kids Forward. We are uniting with Black, Brown, white, rural and immigrant families to ensure the results of their hard work make it back to our communities and the wealthiest pay what they owe.

Over the past two years our multiracial team—based in both small and large communities—has engaged with more than 75 community partners across the state, including both direct service providers and statewide advocacy groups. Kids Forward's Reimagine Wisconsin Policy Agenda is the culmination of these partnerships and discussions, providing unique insights into the challenges and policy solutions facing families furthest from opportunity.

The state's historically strong fiscal position is an opportunity to invest in a stronger foundation for children and families, through:

Invest in Communities

- **Targeted tax cuts for working families.** Wisconsin's tax system requires families with fewer resources to pay a larger share of their income than the wealthiest one percent. The budget should use its additional revenue wisely by targeting tax cuts to low and middle income families, increasing refundable tax cuts that help families with low incomes, and reducing tax breaks for the highest income earners. Targeted tax credits that Kids Forward supports include:
 - Increasing the Earned Income and Homestead Tax Credit to help working families meet basic needs
 - Increasing the child and dependent care credit
 - Creating a refundable tax credit for family caregivers
 - Expanding property tax credits for veterans and their surviving spouses
- **Invest at least \$300 million per year to continue funding for Child Care Counts.** Since 2020, the Child Care Counts program has been crucial for Wisconsin parents and caregivers and Wisconsin's child care infrastructure. It has supported provider compensation, allowed programs to keep tuition as reasonable as possible, and enabled more providers in both rural and urban areas to stay open and serve families. Reliable child care is essential for working families to stay employed.

- **Allow occupational credentials for DACA recipients.** State law should be amended so that Wisconsin residents with DACA status can work in professions that require professional licensure, such as teachers, plumbers, nursing assistants, or dentists.
- **Tuition equity for all Wisconsin residents.** Amend state residency laws so that in-state tuition rates apply for all Wisconsin students who meet state residency requirements regardless of their immigration status, including those with DACA and people without documentation.
- **Increase aid to school districts to support education for English language learners in schools.** Increasing bilingual services would improve the academic environment for students of color, many of whom speak Spanish or Hmong as their first language. This will also allow for rural districts to have access to the resources they need for English Learner students.
- **Repeal or cap the manufacturing and agricultural tax credit.** This credit primarily benefits millionaires and lets many manufacturers pay almost no income taxes. Reinvest those savings into public infrastructure, education, and other local community needs.
- **Allow communities to maintain local control by overturning rules that preempt increasing wages, organizing, renters' rights, and creating paid family leave policies.** The Wisconsin legislature preempts cities and local governments from pursuing higher wages. This disproportionately affects Black, Brown, and rural communities.
- **Invest in communities through increased Youth Aids allocations.** The Governor's budget should include community-based alternatives to incarceration that are youth-centered, evidence-based, and often more cost-effective. These proposals also build on reforms that have occurred over the past two decades in Wisconsin and align with recent legislation aimed at restructuring the juvenile justice system towards a "Wisconsin Model of Youth Justice."

Defend Worker Power

- **Raise the minimum wage to a living wage of \$20 per hour and index it to inflation.** All workers deserve fair compensation to support their families. Securing a livable wage is essential for accessing basic necessities like housing, healthcare, childcare, and education. Low wages also perpetuate poverty and weaken workers' bargaining power in the labor market.
- **Strengthen wage theft laws & misclassification of workers.** Each year, millions of dollars meant for working families are stolen as employers fail to pay workers their rightful wages. This issue disproportionately affects immigrant workers, who already face significant barriers to economic security. This would also strengthen our economy by returning money to working families and taxpayers.
- **Ensure the right to organize & collectively bargain.** Protecting workers' rights to organize and collectively negotiate is critical for fostering sustainable wage growth, especially for Black, Brown, Indigenous, and rural communities who are consistently exploited. By allowing workers to negotiate for fair wages and better working conditions, Wisconsin promotes economic equity and upholds the dignity and humanity of every individual in the workforce.
- **Expand driver licenses for all.** Repealing the 2005 WI Act 126 to extend driver licenses or state identification cards to all residents regardless of their immigration status would benefit all residents of Wisconsin, prioritize community welfare, and foster inclusivity.

Protect Children

- **Oppose the Department of Corrections' request to double the daily rate for youth incarceration in Wisconsin's youth facilities (from \$1268 to over \$2300 a day),** and continue to support the enforcement of Act 185 which would close Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake youth prisons.
- **End the practice of sentencing juveniles to life without parole.** Severe disinvestment, over-policing in communities of color, and racial bias in our legal system has led to youth of color being over-represented within the criminal legal system – from policing to courts to incarceration. But no child deserves to be handed a life sentence in prison with no possibility of freedom. By ending juvenile life without parole, Wisconsin can end the practice of sentencing children to die in prison.
- **Eliminate all youth justice fines and fees.** Wisconsin courts can charge families thousands of dollars when young people get into trouble with the law. If families can't pay these costs, they may face consequences including having their tax returns or wages garnished. Not only does this court debt contribute to the cycle of poverty and racial inequity, but it also increases chances of recidivism and the cycle of incarceration for system-involved youth. Therefore we call on policy makers to eliminate all youth justice fines and fees.
- **"Raise the Minimum Age" of juvenile jurisdiction from 10 to at least 14.** Wisconsin is now an outlier in the country in terms of prosecuting ten year old children as adults; it is one of only a handful of states that allow children so young to be transferred into the adult system. We demand Wisconsin end its persecution of young children by raising the minimum age of juvenile jurisdiction from 10 to at least 14.
- **"Raise the Age" of juvenile jurisdiction from 17 to at least 18.** Every young person in Wisconsin deserves the opportunity to get an education, grow up in safe communities, and realize their potential. However, due to systemic racism and injustice, youth of color are over-represented within the criminal legal system—from policing to courts to incarceration. But, we can take a critical step in the right direction—by raising the age at which young people are treated as adults in the criminal justice system from 17 to 18.
- **Invest in community-based alternatives to incarceration rather than building new youth prisons.** Wisconsin relies far too much on incarceration and blames children for system-wide failures. Instead of incarceration, a better investment for Wisconsin's youth is in basic needs such as health, housing, and employment. Wisconsin should reimagine a community-based continuum of care grounded in youth voice, emerging adult research, and cross-system collaboration.

Ensure Health

- **Fully Expand Medicaid.** Doing so would cover nearly 90,000 adults, 2/3 of which are parents and caregivers. The largest share of people who would be eligible for Medicaid live in rural communities. The budget should reinvest the roughly \$200M in annual GPR savings back into the Medicaid system.
- **Extend 12 months postpartum coverage for Medicaid and BadgerCare prenatal members.** Wisconsin is one of only two states that has failed to extend Medicaid coverage to one-year postpartum. Extending postpartum Medicaid and BadgerCare Prenatal coverage to one year will help address Wisconsin's stark racial maternal and infant mortality disparities and allow birthing parents and infants to have a stable source of care.
- **Serve more students by reforming school-based Medicaid and investing in youth mental health.** Allow more Medicaid dollars to support school-based physical and mental health services by ending the "Free

Care Rule.” The budget must also substantially invest in other mental health supports for kids, especially those living in provider shortage areas in both urban and rural communities.

- **Improve Medicaid by allowing it to reimburse community-based health providers.** Allow Medicaid to reimburse care provided by community health workers, douglas, and other workers who directly support communities to help increase access to care.
- **Implement a statewide language access plan.** Wisconsin currently does not have a statewide language access plan, although some counties and state agencies have prepared their own. A state-level plan and office can coordinate and help fund language access services, set standards for language access services, and offer support for providers seeking to reduce language barriers.
- **Create or expand the Family Planning Only Services program,** so that it provides family planning service benefits to all otherwise-eligible individuals regardless of their immigration status.
- **Extend the Medicaid emergency service benefit, so that all people otherwise ineligible due to their immigration status can better access health care in emergency situations.** Currently emergency Medicaid services are not available to so-called “childless adults” who would be eligible for BadgerCare Plus if not for their immigration status.
- **Culturally and linguistically responsive services.** Increase availability of culturally and linguistically responsive mental health and SUD services by incentivizing providers through Medicaid rates and/or changes in private health insurance.
- **Fully fund the Farm to School program through DATCP and DPI.** This program enables communities to develop farm to school partnerships, implement farm to school initiatives, and strengthen Wisconsin’s statewide farm to school network.
- **Include Healthy School Meals for All in the budget.** Providing school meals for every child would improve children’s health and educational outcomes, reduce stigma, and put all kids on an equal playing field.
- **Support healthier early childhood development.** Investing in home visiting programs, such as Family Foundations, and supporting early childhood mental health through the Infant Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation program will ensure more young children are receiving care to support socio-emotional learning and address mental health concerns.



Kids Forward is a statewide antiracist policy center that inspires action and advocates for children and families of color, rural communities, and those furthest from opportunity in Wisconsin. We provide decision makers with community-informed research, analysis, and effective policy solutions to ensure that every child and family has the opportunity to live secure, healthy lives.

kidsforward.org

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