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34 Groups Urge Governor to Veto Restrictions on Public Assistance

Thirty-four Wisconsin organizations sent Governor Evers a letter today urging him to veto bills that would reduce access to health care, nutrition assistance and unemployment insurance benefits.

The letter says that “the package of bills rushed through the Legislature in February scapegoats low-wage Wisconsinites who are fighting to take care of themselves and their families.” It concludes that those bills will fail to achieve the goal of “strengthening our workforce and moving Wisconsin forward,” and instead they will “make our state weaker and more vulnerable.”

A broad spectrum of groups signed onto the letter, including organizations representing small businesses, workers, community health centers and religious institutions. The signers also include advocates for women, children, seniors, people with disabilities, and victims of domestic violence.

The letter raises a concern that some of the bills headed to the Governor’s desk “would exacerbate the severe racial disparities in our state, which are among the worst in the nation.”

William Parke-Sutherland, a health policy analyst at Kids Forward, elaborated on that concern. He explained that even though most of the people participating in public assistance programs are white, “because of the long and persistent discrimination and structural racism that have harmed people of color, they would be disproportionately affected by restrictions on public assistance.”

The letter says there are more effective ways of increasing the number of workers in Wisconsin without harming low-income families. “If legislators are serious about increasing workforce participation, they should boost the minimum wage and adopt other measures that address real barriers to work, such as access to affordable child care, transportation, broadband, and paid family and medical leave.”

Two of the bills that were approved by the Legislature and await action by the Governor would reduce participation in BadgerCare. One of them, AB 936, would disqualify some adults from their BadgerCare coverage for six months if they turn down any offer for a full-time job, increase in hours, or wage increase, regardless of whether the job offers health insurance.

Sara Finger, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Alliance for Women’s Health, noted that more than 7 of 10 adults in BadgerCare are already working, and for many of them if they increase their hours to full time they will earn too much to remain eligible for BadgerCare – even if they work in a minimum wage job. “A much more effective and humane way to increase workforce participation is to increase the income limit for BadgerCare,” she said.

Advocates for seniors and people with disabilities also have a number of concerns about the bills, including the effects for caregivers who are eligible for BadgerCare because of their low incomes. Janet Zander of the Greater Wisconsin Agency on Aging Resources said AB 936 “could have very negative consequences for family caregivers who are unable to accept additional work hours or promotions due to their caregiving responsibilities.” She added, “although the bill includes exceptions for caregivers of adults with disabilities and older adults, those exceptions are far too narrow.”

The letter also expresses concerns about a bill that would immediately restore a work requirement for many adults who receive FoodShare benefits, Stephanie Jung Dorfman, Executive Director of Feeding Wisconsin, said “it’s a mistake to view the FoodShare program as a work program rather than the nutrition program that it is, and to use punitive sanctions rather than reducing barriers to work for those experiencing hunger.”

She added, “mandating work requirements, especially as Wisconsin is still recovering from the pandemic, does not address the real challenges that many of our neighbors face when trying to engage with the labor and training market, such as access to affordable, quality childcare and transportation.”