



WISCONSIN COUNCIL ON

**children
& families**

Raising Voices to Make Every Kid Count

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2013 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. It is our collective responsibility to make sure all Wisconsin families have a chance to move forward. WCCF advocates based on what the evidence shows is best for children and families. 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 have an impressive return on investment; 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:

- 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, and sustaining and improving 4-year-old kindergarten, Head Start and Early Head Start, and 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) to close the large gap in BadgerCare coverage for adults without dependent children.
- Assist in developing and implementing a health insurance exchange that holds down costs and improves access to quality coverage for employees of small businesses and people in the individual market.
- 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:

- Protect the progressive elements of the income tax code, including tax credits that help working families with children lift themselves out of poverty. Wisconsin should also eliminate the preferential tax treatment given to investment income, which results in tax breaks for the best off.
- Emphasize accountability in the tax code by periodically reviewing corporate tax breaks and eliminating those that aren't tied to job creation.
- Ensure that businesses pay their fair share of income taxes, and make sure that the tax system doesn't give some businesses an unfair advantage over their competitors (WCCF is a member of the MainStreet Wisconsin Coalition).
- 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 between districts in poverty rates and to ensure all students get an education that enables them to learn in school and succeed in life.

Economic Security and Poverty Reduction

In Wisconsin, childhood poverty is increasing at 2 ½ times the national rate, and nearly half of African American children live in poverty. Helping families lift themselves out of poverty requires a focus on access to good jobs, sustainable housing, adequate health care and high quality early care and education. In addition to the priorities outlined previously, strategies for addressing these interconnected needs include:

- Strengthen the technical college and University system and improve financial aid to help bridge the jobs gap.
- Expand the successful Transitional Jobs program.
- Index the minimum wage to inflation.
- Implement reforms to pay-day lending.

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:

- Improve the quality, consistency, accountability and outcomes of child welfare prevention, early intervention and intervention services.
- 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.

Racial Equity

Wisconsin has some of the highest levels of racial and ethnic disparities of any state in the country, 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 the 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 to identify potential opportunities for change.
- A public commitment by state and local leaders to reduce disparities on key measures of child and family well-being.
- Promote targeted investments in health care, education, education, justice, and child welfare to reduce disparities.