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For Immediate Release

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DRW Commends Positive Budget Initiatives for People with Disabilities

Disability Rights Wisconsin, Wisconsin's Protection and Advocacy system for people with disabilities, is heartened by Governor Evers' attention to initiatives important to children and adults with disabilities in the 2023 – 2025 biennial budget.

"We are pleased that Governor Evers has included budget proposals that are essential to children and adults with disabilities," stated DRW Executive Director Lea Kitz. "We look forward to working with the Governor and Legislature to improve the lives of people with disabilities throughout the state."

The budget includes positive initiatives in the areas of home and community based long- term care services, resources to address abuse, education, mental health, transportation, dental care, voting rights, reforms of the justice system, and civil legal services.

Long-term Care (LTC)

Wisconsin has a critical caregiver workforce shortage that is jeopardizing the ability of people with disabilities who rely on these services to remain in the community. DRW supports the \$15M for health care and long-term care providers to implement innovative practices to recruit and retain workers, as well as increased funding for personal care services and the direct care workforce. DRW is also encouraged to see that the bill provides up to \$5.5M to Wisconsin's American Indian tribes and bands to make capital improvements to their LTC facilities and to improve and repair homes of tribal members with LTC needs who receive services at home. A study by DHS demonstrated that this is a critical need for tribes.

Resources to Address Abuse

DRW supports the proposed additional positions at the Bureau of Assisted Living and Office of Caregiver Quality. Given the significant increase in reports of abuse and neglect, it is important to have additional capacity for misconduct investigations and surveys of facilities.

K-12 Education

Students with disabilities are general-education students first and foremost, so DRW welcomes the proposed investments in general school aids and per-pupil increases together with the revenue limit increases that allow districts to use that funding. For students with disabilities in particular, the proposal includes a \$1.01 billion sum-sufficient increase to 60% reimbursement in the special education categorical aid, and a \$7.5 million sum-sufficient increase to 60% reimbursement in FY25 for high-cost special education aid. Education for students with disabilities has been severely underfunded at the state level for decades, which has combined with general education funding lagging far behind inflation, putting intense pressure on our districts and students even as they struggle to recover from pandemic-related losses; this common-sense level of investment is a much-needed step

School-based Mental Health

The governor's proposal includes an increase of \$36 million across the biennium to expand school-based mental health aid to include school counselors, psychologists, and nurses as well as social workers. There is new aid of \$236 million across the biennium for comprehensive school mental health systems, that does not rely on competitive grants. Student mental health struggles, already in a state of crisis before the pandemic, have continued to worsen in the wake of the pandemic, so a substantial investment is needed.

Community Mental Health Services

DRW strongly endorses Governor Evers proposals to expand community based mental health services, including support for peer run services, Medicaid Community Support Program funding, crisis services, and mental health services for individuals who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing or Deaf-Blind. "Limited access to community based mental health care has resulted in people with mental illness being placed in costly out of home and institutional settings or confined in jails or prisons," stated Barbara Beckert, Director External Advocacy. "Wisconsin must prioritize increased access to a continuum of community based mental health services, and reduce reliance on costly and traumatizing inpatient and institutional settings."

Dental Care

DRW supports the proposed investment in community dental health coordinators focused particularly on underserved communities. Dental care is extremely difficult to access for people in benefits programs or with few financial resources, which is very often the situation for people with disabilities.

Re-entry Support

DRW is encouraged to see the expansion of the Department of Corrections Earned Release program and the creation of an Earned Compliance Credit. "Far too often individuals with disabilities or mental illness are pushed into the state correctional system instead of receiving the community-based services and treatment that they need" said Kit Kerschensteiner, DRW's Director of Legal and Advocacy Services. "These programs expand the pathway to reentry to the community and access to these important community services."

Youth Justice Reform

DRW strongly supports the return of 17-year-olds to the youth justice system where age-appropriate education and mental health services are available, with specific youth aids for counties to serve them. "This recognition of the unique needs of justice-involved youth has been long called for," stated Phyllis Greenberger, Supervising Advocacy Specialist. The creation of a Juvenile Justice Reform Review Committee to recommend reforms to the juvenile justice system will include much needed improvements in procedural and substantive reforms such as the creation of a blended juvenile and adult sentence structure for certain juvenile offenders to replace the serious juvenile offender program, elimination of original adult court jurisdiction over juveniles, increasing the minimum age of delinquency, use of detention facilities and other important improvements.

Access to Transportation

DRW supports Governor Evers' proposed 4% increases to paratransit and elderly and disabled specialized transportation aids, and the 4% increase to state mass transit aids. A high percentage of people with disabilities are non-drivers. Access to accessible affordable transportation is essential to their ability to live in the community, access basic needs, and maintain employment. Transit services are central to allowing direct care workers to provide care and must be prioritized given the workforce crisis which is putting people with disabilities at risk.

Voter Support

Many people with disabilities experience barriers to voting. DRW supports the proposal to fund automatic voter registration, which will support voter registration as well as keeping voting information accurate and updated. DRW also supports the funding for additional staff for the Wisconsin Election Commission which plays a key role in administration and oversight of Wisconsin elections.

Civil Legal Services

DRW is very pleased with the addition of a line item to support access to civil legal services. Wisconsin has no automatic right to legal counsel or representation for noncriminal issues, no matter how pressing the need. Unlike nearly all other states, Wisconsin provides no financial support for civil legal aid from GPR. We would like to see the purpose expanded beyond eviction protection, to include civil legal help with the numerous barriers faced by people with disabilities that can include housing, transportation, caregiving, education, and discrimination. Helping people with these issues often avoids evolving expensive crises after escalation.

Wisconsin has a proud tradition of bipartisan support for programs for children and adults with disabilities. As the budget moves forward, we look forward to working with legislators and Governor Evers to address the long-term care workforce crisis, increase access to accessible transportation, expand access to community based mental health services, address the needs of youth and adults with mental health conditions in the justice system, improve access to voting, and ensure that children with significant disabilities can access community supports and special education services.

For additional information, see DRW's [2023-2025 Biennial Budget and Policy Priorities for Wisconsinites with Disabilities \(accessible PDF\)](#).

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 them free from abuse and neglect.