The Arc Wisconsin supports people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) over “The Arc” of their lifetime. Since 1960, The Arc Wisconsin has served individuals and their families through our 14 locally affiliated chapters across the state. The Arc Wisconsin works to develop programs and advocate for public policy — giving people with I/DD the opportunity to learn, live, and work inclusively in their communities.

Members of The Arc Wisconsin make the following recommendations in the 2019 — 2021 budget.

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Direct care workers are essential to helping people with disabilities with things like bathing, dressing, medications, meals, participation in the community, supports at a job, and more. Although many Wisconsinites with disabilities are eligible for Medicaid personal care services or long-term care supports through programs like Family Care and IRIS, direct care workers are difficult to find. According to a Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations survey, 85% of all people with disabilities cannot find paid help to meet all their care hours. Agencies report a worker turnover rate of 50%. Direct care workers make an average of $10.47/hour and often do not have access to health care benefits. Agencies that provide direct care services have limited revenue and can be up to 90% or more reliant on Medicaid rates to pay the wages and benefits of their employees. Workers are instead taking jobs at fast-food and retail stores where pay, benefits, and hours are better. An estimated 43% of the direct care workforce makes wages so low they qualify for public assistance. Wisconsin’s projected need is expected to increase by 20,000 workers in 2026.  

**OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Direct Care Workers who provide care to people with I/DD should be paid a higher wage and have access to affordable health care.
- Support expansion of Medicaid/Badgercare to 138% FPL to ensure there is access to affordable healthcare for workers; explore other options like a Medicaid buy-in that allows workers to purchase Medicaid healthcare on a sliding scale.
- Support the Governor’s proposed $29 million increase to the Family Care workforce.
- Make a similar investment in the IRIS direct care workforce (no IRIS worker funds are currently included in the budget).
- Increase the personal care rate. The Governor’s proposed 1.5% rate increase for personal care is far too low. An increase of at least 11% is necessary to raise worker wages and address the needs of critically underfunded agencies.

1 National Alliance for Caregiving 2015 Report on Caregiving in the U.S.
SUPPORT FAMILIES

Families are the backbone of the caregiving industry in Wisconsin, providing an estimated 80% of all care for loved ones with disabilities and older adults. In Wisconsin, nearly two-thirds of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (of a total of 54,202) live with their family and a quarter of these caregivers are over age 60. More than half of all family caregivers say they are very or extremely stressed and cannot find respite care and other resources to give them a break. These caregiving responsibilities are impacting people’s ability to work their regular jobs — with 55% saying they’ve had to cut back hours, take a leave of absence (43%), or take an early retirement (17%).

The state’s Respite Care program (State Statute 46.986) has not had a funding increase in 18 years. Other states have invested in sophisticated worker registries that facilitate recruitment of trained workers and match workers with local care needs and individuals and families seeking support.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Increase respite funding and supports available to families. $1.17 million over the biennium.
- Provide funding and direct the Department of Health Services to issue a request for proposals (RFP) to develop a worker registry that would include care workers (individuals), providers (agencies/facilities), and fiscal agents.
- Fund a Family Caregiver/Family Navigator pilot project to meet the needs of family caregivers in underserved communities, including areas of the state with demonstrated racial disparities in the adult long-term services and supports system. $1.1 million over the biennium.
- Support the Governor’s proposal to expand access to family medical leave to people who work for smaller employers (down to 25 employees from 50) and expand the category of people who qualify for leave to include those caring for grandparents, grandchildren, or siblings.

2 Braddock et al., Coleman Institute and Department of Psychiatry, University of Colorado, 2017; http://stateofthestates.org
3 Family & Individual Needs for Disability Support Report 2017 (Institute on Community Integration; The Arc of the United States.)
SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Wisconsin schools educate more than 116,000 students with disabilities annually (14% of the student population). Even though districts report increases in identification of students with disabilities coupled with a 60% increase in education costs over the last ten years, it has been a decade since the state has increased special education funds. Currently the state reimburses districts for just one quarter of all special education costs. Parents reported the impact of this reduced investment in their children in a recent survey: 58% percent of families said they were concerned for their child’s future due to lack of funding; nearly 40% said their child had experienced a reduction in supports. The 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress results show Wisconsin is 32nd in the nation for 4th grade reading scores for students with disabilities.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Support the Governor’s proposal to increase the state’s support of school district special education costs to reach 60% (up from 25%). This state investment will free up local taxpayer dollars to improve overall quality of education for all students. $600 million over the biennium.

- Support the Governor’s proposal to cover 100% of the costs of school districts to educate “high cost” students (those whose supports exceed $30,000/year). There were 1069 high cost students in 2018.

- Support the Governor’s proposal to increase funds for mental health services in schools. $63 million over the biennium.
People with disabilities in Wisconsin want to work — but getting the right supports, finding transportation, or connecting with employers who don’t have stereotypes about workers with disabilities is difficult. Employment rates remain low. A person without a disability is three times more likely to be working than someone with a disability. The Institute for Community Inclusion shows Wisconsin’s integrated employment rate for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (at 20%) is lower than other states that have made targeted employment investments: Washington, 87%; New Hampshire, 45%; Maryland, 45%; Vermont, 38%. In the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation’s (DVR) most recent interview of people working in sheltered workshops (6,509 workers), more than 40% of people with disabilities say they want to or would consider community employment. There are some signs of improvement of employment for youth. Since passage of the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) which requires additional supports, the percentage of youth with intellectual disabilities engaged in work or post school education in Wisconsin has increased to 71.6% in 2017 (up from 66% in 2014).

Having one paid job while in high school doubles a youth’s chances for employment as an adult. Due to lack of funding and training, many Wisconsin districts do not operate formal youth transition programs or programs that secure community jobs for youth.

**OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Support the Governor’s proposal to increase payments to schools under the Transition Improvement Grant (from $1000 to $1500/student). Schools receive the payment only after they prove that youth with disabilities from their district are either enrolled in postsecondary education or training programs or have retained a paid job one year after graduation.

Support the Governor’s proposal to increase funding for Transition Readiness Grants that have allowed schools to purchase vans or other transportation to get youth to job experiences, supported job coach or staff training, or other improvements to their transition programs. In 2018 DPI received 130 applications for this grant program totaling requests over $9 million (there is currently only $1.5 million in grant funding available). $7 million over the biennium.

Fund a targeted Transformation Fund for providers offering facility-based pre-vocational (sheltered workshop) and day services. Support providers to make changes to their business model that can help get more people with disabilities employed in community jobs and help providers comply with new federal home and community-based regulations. Develop a Competitive grant fund: $6.75 million for up to 30 providers; one-time award of between $25,000 and $150,000.

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While investments in Family Care and IRIS programs have meant that adults with disabilities do not have to wait for critical supports, the same is not true for children. Currently, 1,157 children with significant disabilities and their families in Wisconsin are waiting for basic supports like modifications to their home, essential supplies, assistive technology, and respite care simply because the program is not fully funded. Recent analysis by the Department of Health Services reveals that despite efforts to reach all eligible families, only 25% of children potentially eligible for long-term supports are connected to services. When families go without care or become stressed in handling care on their own, they often quit their jobs, experience financial troubles or seek costly in-patient treatment for their children at state expense.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Support the Governor’s proposal to increase funding and end the children’s waiting list once and for all.

- Support the Governor’s proposal to establish Family Support and Disability Resource Centers that will streamline intake, application, and screening functions for children. Hire family navigators, resource specialists, and ombudsman to assist families with navigating the system and accessing appropriate supports. $4.5 million over the biennium.
Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) Savings Accounts, authorized nationally in 2014, are a way for a person with a disability to save money tax-free without impacting their Medicaid and other benefits. ABLE helps people with disabilities to work and earn more money and families to save funds for their child’s future. Up to $15,000 can be invested by a person or their family annually, with funds withdrawn for approved disability-related expenses. Wisconsin is one of just nine states that does not operate an ABLE program and Wisconsin has not publicized the use of ABLE accounts. As a result, access to ABLE in Wisconsin has been limited; experienced financial planners estimate that residents in other states are opening ABLE accounts at a much faster pace.⁶

OUR RECOMMENDATION:

Change state law to require the Department of Financial Institutions to enter into a state partnership contract with another state’s established ABLE savings account program. There is no/limited cost participate in another state’s ABLE partnership program.

⁶ According to the Ohio STABLE program (the largest program in the nation which also operates STABLE partnership programs with 11 other states), states that are promoting their own ABLE programs have higher numbers of accounts open through STABLE than WI: MO-900; GA-500; AZ-400; KY-300; WI-106. (These numbers are not indicative of all ABLE programs open in a state but offer comparison.)
INCREASE ACCESS TO DENTAL CARE

People with disabilities in Wisconsin have great difficulty obtaining regular dental care: 29% of adults with disabilities reported having at least one permanent tooth removed over the past year, and 26% said they had not visited a dentist within the past year. More than 1 million Wisconsinites get dental care through Medicaid, but only 37% of the state’s dentists accept Medicaid.

OUR RECOMMENDATION:

Support the Governor’s proposal to increase Medicaid rates for dentists who serve people with disabilities and dentists who serve higher proportions of patients using Medicaid.

• $5 million for payments to dental providers that serve Medicaid recipients with physical and intellectual disabilities
• 50% increase in Medicaid reimbursement for non-profit dental providers who serve 50% or more of people who don’t have dental insurance or who use Medicaid
• 30% increase in Medicaid reimbursement for for-profit dental providers who serve at least 5% of persons in Medicaid.

Support the Governor’s proposal to license dental therapists to address the provider shortage for basic dental care.
INVEST IN TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS

When people with disabilities can’t drive and have no transportation options, they are often isolated and unable to work or participate in their communities. A recent Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations survey indicates that 54% of people with disabilities can’t get or keep a job due to lack of transportation; 61% can’t get to medical appointments and 58% can’t stay connected to their families. Wisconsin public transportation funding has been cut or has remained flat for several budgets. This means transit routes in many communities have been cut back or don’t run on evenings and weekends, and workers who don’t drive cannot reach certain parts of a city through public transit.

OUR RECOMMENDATION:

Support the Governor’s proposal for a 21% ($3 million) increase in specialized transportation and a 10% increase in paratransit funding.

Advocate for other solutions for non-drivers in rural and other small communities that do not have transit bus routes. Find options that let people use public transportation to cross county lines and travel where they need to go statewide.

Require the Department of Health Services, in their reauthorization of the Family Care waiver, to allow for payment of creative transportation options when traditional options are lacking (e.g. paying families or community members to provide rides, reimbursing mileage and fuel costs of volunteer drivers, using providers like Uber or Lyft where available, allowing reimbursement for shared rides, etc.) Require that long-term care plans that include an employment goal for an individual also address transportation for that goal.