

April 9, 2021

To: Representative Born, Co-Chair
Senator Marklein, Co-Chair
Members, Joint Committee on Finance

From: Lisa Pugh, The Arc Wisconsin

Re: 2021-2023 Biennial Budget - Priorities for People with Disabilities

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

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony about the needs of people with disabilities and their families in this budget.

In addition to directing the work of The Arc Wisconsin, I also serve as co-chair of the state's largest cross-disability coalition of organizations, the Survival Coalition. Throughout the pandemic, Survival has continually surveyed people with disabilities about their experiences. Clearly, people with disabilities' lives have been impacted greatly - from adults who live in group homes who have not seen family or friends in over a year, to children with disabilities who have fallen even further behind their peers in their learning and now struggle with new mental health and behavioral issues, to family caregivers who have taken on extra roles as their ability to hire direct care and other respite workers is limited or non-existent.

Many of the gaps in supports and community access for people with disabilities of all ages existed prior to the pandemic and simply got much worse over the last 12 months.

In addition to wise investment of federal COVID-19 recovery money, disability advocates with The Arc Wisconsin are hoping that the legislature will prioritize sustainable investments in this biennial budget across a variety of areas. I am sharing [The Arc Wisconsin's complete policy agenda](#) with this committee but will highlight a few items today.

First of all, Family Caregivers. I was able to serve along with bi-partisan legislators and other stakeholders recently in the Governor's Task Force on Caregiving. Over the course of a year we heard about the significant paid direct care workforce crisis and the stress that has been putting on our state's family caregivers who continue to provide an estimated 80% of all care. Family members want to continue providing this care. It saves the state money when families can support their loved ones and don't place them in a costly publicly funded setting or nursing home. But families need a break. They need to be able to save for their own futures, take care of their own health and keep their jobs. Regardless of whatever essential

investments we can make to sustain the paid direct care workforce, we need more support for family caregivers. We strongly urge you to support the recommendations from the Governor's Task Force on Caregiving that are included in this budget, including the investment in an evidence-based family caregiver assessment that can target scarce resources to caregivers on the brink of crisis and expanded family caregiver supports at our Aging and Disability Resource Centers.

Also, the paid direct care workforce needs significant sustainable support in order to address our state's future population needs. We and our loved ones deserve quality, well-trained care from a workforce that is paid an adequate wage. Therefore, I ask you to prioritize the directive in the Governor's budget to establish equitable and sustainable minimum rates for home- and community-based long-term care supports across both Family Care and IRIS.

We also express strong support for the Governor's proposal to increase the level of special education aid to reimburse 50 percent of aidable costs by the end of the 2021-23 biennium. I cannot stress enough how this additional funding supports all children in our school districts as not only are the needs of children with disabilities met, but by filling this gap in state funding, local districts will be able to use district general funds to enhance the quality of supports and staffing that help all students. We also support increased funding for the Special Education Transition Readiness Grant fund that will ensure our youth with disabilities can get jobs.

Finally, the last issue I would like to raise is ABLE Savings Accounts. For the first time the Governor's budget includes a provision to direct the Department of Financial Institutions to develop a Wisconsin ABLE program. ABLE allows parents of young children with disabilities to save for the future - tax-free, just like they do for their children without disabilities. It allows people with disabilities to work more and save more of their earnings, so they are not as reliant on public supports. Currently individuals, including children, can only have \$2,000 in their name or they lose their access to Medicaid which they require not just for healthcare, but for other daily living supports. We have tried the option of families and individuals searching for their own ABLE information and it is not working. Wisconsin is still one of 6 states that does not operate an ABLE program of any kind. This is a disservice to state residents. ABLE should be offered along with EdVest as a savings option for families, with the same, marketing outreach and technical assistance that comes with the state's EdVest program.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share these priorities. I urge you to consider all the policy priorities listed in The Arc Wisconsin policy agenda.