



TO: Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children & Families
FROM: Heidi Bartz, Supervisor Prevention Program, and Melanie Hobbs, Supervisor, Prevention Program Children's Wisconsin
DATE: Thursday, January 25, 2024
RE: Support for SB 803 – Funding to the Family Foundations home visitation program

Chair James and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share testimony with you today. My name is Heidi and I'm joined by my colleague Melanie and we are supervisors of Family Foundations-funded home visiting programs in Milwaukee and Janesville. We're here today to share Children's strong support for this bipartisan legislation. We want to thank you, Senator James, as a bill author, along with Representative Rozar, for your work on this proposal, as well as several other members of this committee for cosponsoring this legislation.

Children's is the region's only independent health care system dedicated solely to the health and well-being of kids. As such, we offer a wide array of programs and services inside our hospital and clinic walls and out in our communities. Between our hospitals in Milwaukee and Neenah, primary, specialty and urgent care clinics and community services offices across the state – we provide kids and their families with care and services they need to promote health, safety and well-being. As you may know, Children's is also the largest not-for-profit, community-based agency serving children and families in the state, providing community services to approximately 15,000 children and families annually with more than a dozen locations across Wisconsin. This includes child and family counseling, child advocacy centers, foster and adoption care and family support services.

Wisconsin's Family Foundations Home Visiting program distributes more than \$10 million a year to entities throughout the state, including Children's, to provide pregnant women, children and families with voluntary, in-home supports and mentoring through their children's first years of life. Home visiting is a low cost, sustainable prevention measure which aims to reduce child welfare system involvement, keeping children healthy, safe and at home with their parents. It helps reduce the risk of child maltreatment, strengthen family functioning, provide connection to community resources, and promote healthy child development.

Children's provides individualized, home-based parenting education and support programming in communities across the state through more than 10 state-funded home visiting programs. Four of our programs receive Family Foundations Home Visiting support, including our programs offered in the following counties: Forest, Langlade, Lincoln, Oneida, Vilas, Milwaukee, Jackson, Trempealeau and Rock. We also offer 6 other home visiting programs funded through other county and philanthropic sources. Services often occur in the home or a community location of their choosing on a frequent basis to provide education on a variety of topics like pregnancy, health, child development, and safe sleep; home visitors also offer guidance on navigating the often complex food and child assistance programs. Home visitors and parents share thoughts and goals with the trained home visitor offering support, mentoring, guidance and education to help families best care for their children and themselves. Using evidence-based approaches, home visitors help families to improve physical and mental health, engage parents in their child's education and achievements, empower families to become economically self-sufficient and promote positive parenting practices.

Across all of Children's home visiting programs, available data for 2023 indicates we served more than 525 families. Importantly, the families Children's serves through home visiting continue to demonstrate growth and positive outcomes, including 97% of children having an identified primary care provider. Home visitors

help to build formal and informal family supports, enhance infant mental health, improve birth outcomes, and enhance family functioning by reducing risk, building protective factors and supporting family goals.

Studies continue to reflect the impact of a mother's health on her baby's health and the strong connection between the two. The health and well-being of a mother from pre-pregnancy to postpartum has implications on a child's physical, cognitive and social-emotional development. Maternal morbidity and mortality continue to be of significant concern across the nation and here in Wisconsin. It's disheartening that moms of color and those living in rural areas face significantly higher rates of preventable maternal injury and death resulting in disparities with lasting impacts for families across our state. Children's, along with a coalition of several community partners, is implementing the Milwaukee County Healthy Start Program which supports maternal-child health for African American women. As part of the five-year federal grant, Children's and our partners are providing maternal community health navigation services, child birth education classes, group-based parenting classes, ensuring access to maternal care providers, including midwives, as well as providing fatherhood-specific programming and other resources.

The teams we work with across the state have countless stories to share of families whose lives are forever changed by their connection with their home visitors. While each story is unique, the common theme is that home visitors provide a source of guidance, support, encouragement and reassurance when families are navigating some of their most challenging seasons of life.

One of my colleagues had been working with a mom enrolled in our home visiting program for several years. She had found our home visiting services to be extremely beneficial to her and her family, as our team had supported mom with navigating a difficult pregnancy, connecting to community resources, assisting with housing issues and supporting her baby's development when he fell behind in his gross motor skills. When this mom went to the grocery store one day, she came across a pregnant mother and her family outside the store who were experiencing homelessness. Selflessly, she brought the family to her own home to give them a safe and stable place to stay. She connected the pregnant mother right away with Children's home visiting services. Our home visitors supported the family in getting the baby items they needed and ensured they were connected to medical resources. Not long after, she gave birth to a healthy baby – the mom who took them in was even present at the birth. The mom who helped connect the family to Children's is part of a church community who helped the family secure their own safe housing. Now, the family is focusing on starting their own business to help support their growing family. Sharing this story with you provides me with the opportunity to highlight two successes: that of a mom supported by our program whose growth, self-sufficiency and compassion for others led her to helping another mom get connected to our impactful care and support.

Another mom our colleagues helped from the Wausau area shared her story with us. After years of sexual and emotional abuse, this mom became pregnant at 17 years old. She entered the real-world unequipped with the life skills she needed. She was in an emotionally and physically abusive relationship where she was introduced to heroin. She became addicted to heroin and other drugs, found herself sleeping on the floor of drug houses when she found out she was pregnant again. She sought help at a methadone clinic the next day and during a prenatal care appointment found out she was seven months pregnant with a healthy baby girl. She signed up for parenting supports with Children's but was hesitant to believe someone could be there for her. With her home visitor's support, the mom was able to provide Christmas presents, clothing and a kitchen table for her children, along with help with breastfeeding, applying for her own apartment and getting her driver's license. She is repairing the relationship with her eldest son, is receiving counseling and, after obtaining her GED, excelled academically in college. The mom shared that her message is that if you are struggling, it's never too late; there are resources available and there are people, like my home visitor, who care.

SB 803 would provide a meaningful increase in funds enabling more programs like ours to serve more kids and families in need across our state. These evidence based programs¹ are impactful by helping families develop the skills and tools they need to foster an environment where they are setting and striving to reach goals, building confidence and creating a home environment where their kids can thrive towards a brighter future. As you've heard, these services can be life-changing for families, setting them on a path of self-sufficiency and well-being. When I asked one of the moms I work with what she would want lawmakers to know about home visiting, she shared "I absolutely love the program. I want them to know it works!"

Thank you for the opportunity to share Children's Wisconsin's support for this important legislation that would provide critical funding to home visiting programs across our state. We encourage your support of this legislation and our team is happy to answer any questions now or in the future.

Heidi Bartz
Supervisor, Prevention Program
Children's Wisconsin

Melanie Hobbs
Supervisor, Prevention Program
Children's Wisconsin

Jodi Bloch
Director, State & Local Government Relations
Children's Wisconsin
608-217-9508
jbloch@childrenswi.org

Children's Wisconsin (Children's) serves children and families in every county across the state. We have inpatient hospitals in Milwaukee and the Fox Valley. We care for every part of a child's health, from critical care at one of our hospitals, to routine checkups in our primary care clinics. Children's also provides specialty care, urgent care, emergency care, dental care, school health nurses, foster care and adoption services, family resource centers, child health advocacy, health education, family preservation and support, mental health services, pediatric medical research and the statewide poison hotline.

¹ Included here are links to some of the home visiting program models utilized by Children's Wisconsin in the Family Foundations Home Visiting program. They outline research findings, effectiveness and positive outcomes.

Healthy Families America: https://www.healthyfamiliesamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/HFA_Evidence_of_Effectiveness_2022_Website.pdf

Parents as Teachers: <https://parentsasteachers.org/research-and-results/>

Casey Family Foundation issue paper: https://www.casey.org/media/22.07-QFF-SC-Home-visiting-programs_fnl.pdf