



TO: Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children & Families
FROM: Amy Herbst, Vice President, Mental & Behavioral Health, Children's Wisconsin
DATE: Thursday, February 1, 2024
RE: Support for SB 913 – Psychiatric residential treatment facilities & SB 914 Video recording

Chair James and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share testimony with you today. My name is Amy Herbst and I lead Children's Wisconsin's mental & behavioral health teams who work across our state to improve access to this critical care. I'm here today to share Children's support for this bipartisan legislation. We want to thank you, Senator James, as a bill author with Representative Dittrich, for your work on this proposal.

Children's Wisconsin 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 hospitals (inpatients and outpatient) 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. At Children's, we believe caring for a child's mental and behavioral health is just as important as caring for their physical health. Our expertise across mental health and child well-being runs deep, with our teams caring for thousands of kids with mental and behavioral health challenges every year at our hospital - both inpatient and outpatient, Craig Yabuki Mental Health Walk-In Clinic, primary care clinics, through our foster care and adoptive services, and in schools and communities throughout the state.

As reflected in the U.S. Surgeon General's December 2021 Advisory and the declaration of a "national health emergency in child adolescent mental health" by leading pediatric health care organizations, including Children's Wisconsin, there is an *urgent* need to address the nation's youth mental health crisis. Prior to the pandemic, Wisconsin, like the rest of the country, was experiencing alarming rates of mental health hospitalizations, suicide rates and depression among children and adolescents. The pandemic has hit children's well-being hard and directly, exacerbating what was already a growing crisis. In Wisconsin, 1 in 5 children are living with a serious mental health illness and anxiety, depression, and suicide reports are up, with the percentage of students feeling sad and hopeless *almost every day* jumping to nearly 34%, a 10 percentage point increase over the last ten years. There has been an alarming increase in the number of teens seriously considering suicide, especially among girls, kids of color, and kids who identify as LGBTQ+.

Children's Wisconsin has invested millions in the last few years, along with our philanthropic partners, in a number of initiatives to improve kids' access to mental and behavioral health care. This includes putting in place systems to detect needs sooner and help kids before they are in crisis; reducing stigma by supporting a system of care that ensures mental health is part of every outpatient visit; meeting kids and families where they are by bringing mental and behavioral care closer home by providing more services in schools and clinics; and innovating by opening the first in the state, and we believe in the nation, walk-in clinics for kids' urgent mental health care. We are also doing what we can to address the shortage of mental and behavioral health professionals by hiring and paying qualified therapist trainees (QTTs), providing them the clinical supervision needed to obtain therapist licenses. And most recently, with our partners at the Medical College of Wisconsin, we have recently started a child and adolescent psychology residency training program to help grow this important workforce.

While we work to prevent issues from becoming a crisis, we know that for many Wisconsin kids, they're already in need of a higher level of care to address their mental and behavioral health needs. Children's Hospital Emergency Department and Trauma Center (EDTC) cares for many children with suicide attempts, suicidal ideation and self-injury each year and unfortunately that number has more than doubled over the last ten years going from 722 children in 2013 to 1,545 children in 2023 – and that is just patients seen by Children's EDTC. Because of the increase in volumes of children we see with mental health conditions, two rooms in Children's Hospital new EDTC were specifically designed to be safer for kids with mental and behavioral health issues who may be at risk of harming themselves or others, including our clinicians. These safer rooms are located in a calmer area and equipment in the room can be locked for safety reasons. And yet, we recognize that an emergency room is not an ideal care setting for those experiencing a mental and behavioral health crisis. For children who require a higher level of care, they may be admitted to our hospital while they await a bed to open up at an inpatient or residential treatment facility in our community. While our staff do what they can to care for and support these children safely, children experiencing a mental health crisis need the care and resources available at community treatment centers.

Each day, approximately 20 Wisconsin children require even higher levels of care to meet their mental and behavioral health needs. These children have severe mental, emotional, intellectual and/or behavioral issues and pose a significant risk to themselves or others. These children need 24-hour, intensive and comprehensive mental health treatment in a safe and secure therapeutic environment. Currently, the only appropriate treatment option that is available for children who need this level of care is to be placed in out-of-state psychiatric residential treatment facilities (PRTFs). PRTFs are equipped with the specialized staff and facilities to provide the care that the children need. They have comprehensive services including evaluations, therapies and treatments to best support youth on a path towards safety, health and well-being. Having PRTFs in Wisconsin will support children in being closer to home, closer to their supportive resources and will ease the transition back to their home, school and community. Most importantly, it will support the mental and behavioral health continuum of care for kids creating an environment where more Wisconsin kids who have a more acute psychiatric need can receive care right here in our state. Wisconsin kids should be able to have access to all levels of care they need, including those children who face the most significant mental and behavioral health challenges.

Due to the lack of suitable placement options available, Children's Hospital is in the precarious situation of accommodating youth who can't be safely discharged to home and for whom no other safe and appropriate placement option is available. In 2023, the number patients in this situation has skyrocketed to an increase of over 50%. Due to lack of placement options in Wisconsin like PRTFs, the corresponding extended hospital days totaled over 500 at Children's Hospital during that same time frame.

While we are grateful when we can find care for these kids at places like Chileda, Genesee Lake or Central Wisconsin Center, much more frequently we are unable to utilize them due to capacity limitations and acuity of the patient. We must then assist in the transfer of Wisconsin children to facilities out of state, many of which are PRTFs, in places like Ohio and Tennessee. The safe transfer of these children out of state is often traumatic for them and requires a large clinical and behavioral health care team to help manage. It requires a comprehensive care plan to transport the child via a van service which often extends 12-14 hours. These transports can be highly distressing to the child, and the van service, while exceptional in their care, may need to utilize restraints to ensure safety on the highways. We are not able to transfer children with concurrently aggressive behaviors via flight due to the significant risk they pose to themselves and/or the flight team. The current environment requires additional, continual work of our staff outside of normal operations and is associated with significant stressors.

In 2023, we saw a significant increase in the number of patients aged 7-10 that are being admitted with homicidal and suicidal ideation. These children have a specific plan to harm themselves and others and share these with disquieting repetition. Their parents, while working with county resources, sometimes ask for their child to be found in need of protection and services through the child welfare system as their only option to access the mental health treatment their child needs. Our care coordination teams have not been able to identify any temporary placement for these children as the inpatient mental and behavioral health facilities do not feel equipped programmatically to manage their unique treatment needs. Northwest Passage is an example of one treatment facility in Northwest Wisconsin that we have been able to utilize, however our requests have far outweighed their capacity. Stop and think about that for a second - what a difficult and desperate situation these families are in being driven to choose child protection services in order to get access to the resources their child needs and to protect other children in their home.

Over the last decade, those caring for youth with significant mental and behavioral health needs in our state have come together and lifted up PRTFs as a solution Wisconsin should embrace to better care for kids. We need many partners in this work. Children's does not have inpatient psychiatric beds and while there are providers around the state that do, the complex needs of these children requires a higher level of care and ratio of caregivers to child, along with a specialized physical environment that only PRTFs can provide. We want to be clear that PRTFs are part of the continuum of care that is needed in the state for a small population of kids who need very intensive care. This bill and SB 914 which you are also hearing today that allows for video recording in certain care facilities are the first steps we need. They create the framework for these facilities to be able to consider a future opening in Wisconsin, however financial support for standing these up, and a sustainable payment source, will also be critical components.

On behalf of Children's Wisconsin, and the children who desperately need this level of care, I strongly encourage your support of this legislation. Thank you for your consideration and I am happy to answer questions now or in the future.

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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.