



TO: Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children & Families and Assembly Committee on Mental Health & Substance Abuse Prevention
FROM: David Whelan, Vice President, Child Well-Being, Children's Wisconsin
DATE: Tuesday, May 27, 2025
RE: Support for AB 111/SB 106 – Psychiatric residential treatment facilities

Chair James, Chair Tittl and members of both committees, thank you for the opportunity to share testimony with you today. My name is David Whelan and I lead Children's Wisconsin's Child Well-Being team who works across our state to support kids and strengthen families. I'm here today to share Children's support for this bipartisan legislation. We want to thank the members of the Legislative Council Study Committee, including Senator James, Senator Johnson and Representative Snyder, for their leadership in addressing the important topic of how to better support youth in crisis.

As many of you know, 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 and clinic walls and out in the communities we serve. 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, mental health walk-in clinics, primary care clinics, through our parent support programs and foster care and adoption services, and in schools and communities throughout the state. Importantly, partnership with a wide array of stakeholders and keeping what is best for the patient at the center are key to being able to successfully care for kids' needs across the mental and behavioral health care continuum.

There is an *urgent* need to address the nation's youth mental health crisis. According to the Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health 2024 annual report, 52% of Wisconsin high schoolers reported anxiety and 35% felt sad and hopeless. There has been a concerning increase in the number of teens seriously considering suicide, especially among girls, kids of color, and kids who identify as LGBTQ+.

Over the last five years, Children's Wisconsin, along with our philanthropic partners, committed to investing \$150 million 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 to home by providing more services in schools and clinics; and advancing research, education and innovation, including opening 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) and providing them the clinical supervision needed to obtain therapist licenses. With our partners at the Medical College of Wisconsin, we have recently started a child and adolescent psychology residency training program and pediatric psychology fellowship program to help grow this important workforce.

While we work to prevent mental and behavioral health issues from becoming a crisis, we know that a relatively small but significant group of Wisconsin kids are 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 quadrupled over the last 10+ years going from 722 children in 2013 to 3,065 children in 2024 – and that is just patients seen by Children's EDTC. Because of the increase in volumes of children we see with mental health conditions, four 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 psychiatric hospital or a residential treatment facility. 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 in a setting that can plan for and provide appropriate treatment.

On average each day, 23 Wisconsin children require even higher levels of care to meet their mental and behavioral health needs and are in an out-of-state placement. These children have severe mental, emotional, intellectual and/or behavioral issues and pose a significant risk to themselves or others. They 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 Wisconsin kids who have a more acute psychiatric needs can receive care right here in our state. Wisconsin kids should be able to have access to all levels of care they need, including 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. These are often youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities and conduct disorders. Due to lack of placement options in Wisconsin, last year, mental and behavioral health patients at Children's Hospital experienced nearly 500 avoidable hospital days. This includes more than 150 avoidable hospital days for approximately 10 patients with autism or developmental disabilities.

While we are grateful when we can, at times, find care for kids at places like Chileda, Genesee Lake or Central Wisconsin Center, much more frequently we are unable to utilize these placement resources due to capacity limitations and due to the 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, most often via a van service which often extends 12-14 hours. This process requires additional work for our staff outside of normal operations and is extremely stressful. 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.

While the number of kids with high acuity mental and behavioral health needs is small, their experiences are profound. I'd like to share one story of a youth we've cared for. This child has severe autism with significant behavioral health issues; developmentally, they present with functions similar to those of a toddler. They were admitted to Children's Wisconsin with behavioral aggression issues which required a staff member to regularly sit in their room to help keep

them safe and additional staff to perform regular care safely and appropriately. While the child's medical needs were stabilized, their family didn't have the capacity to manage their aggressive behaviors at home – home care plans could not reliably sustain their safety. Children's case management team worked diligently to find an appropriate placement that could maintain safety and treat their behavioral health needs. Our team exhausted the limited list of the highest-level in-state facilities and contacted more than 30 mental health facilities across the country hoping to find a provider able to meet their care needs. All of those facilities declined placement. During these efforts, the youth spent months in a hospital room at Children's Wisconsin. Children's was eventually able to support their placement at a residential facility out-of-state. This facility had an open bed and thankfully was willing, for the first time, to take a placement from Wisconsin – an exception that demonstrates the challenges we have accessing the right level of care for youth when we do not have an in-state PRTF. Children's covered the significant costs for safe transport out-of-state as well as the expenses for them to return home as they were able to eventually transition to an adult care facility here in Wisconsin closer to family.

The Legislative Council Study Committee brought additional attention to the need for PRTFs in Wisconsin – a solution that those caring for youth with significant mental and behavioral health needs in our state believe will help us better care for this small population of kids. **Importantly, PRTFs are one piece of addressing kids' mental and behavioral health needs.** To strengthen Wisconsin's continuum of care we should also prioritize funding family supportive services like family respite, crisis triage and stabilization homes and upstream services like early childhood mental health, behavioral therapies and early communication skills programs, like sign language. Supporting investments in Level 5 foster care homes for youth who are aging out of care and increased funding for the residential care center pilot currently operating at Chileda will help better support the care and stability of these youth.

As I mentioned earlier, 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 some of these children require a higher level of care and a higher ratio of caregivers to child, along with a specialized physical environment that only PRTFs can provide. 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 helps 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.