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Disability Rights Wisconsin Concerned about Impact of Budget Proposal Cites Major Changes to Family Care, IRIS, Personal Care; Lack of Special Education Investment

Wisconsin's Protection and Advocacy system for people with disabilities is concerned about the impact of major changes proposed for critical programs and supports in the Governor's budget request. At the same time, Disability Rights Wisconsin is pleased to see support for essential cost-to-continue investments and preservation of core benefits throughout the state's Medicaid program that many people with disabilities rely upon to maintain their health and participate in their communities.

"A commitment to core Medicaid services that allow individuals with disabilities to fully participate in community life is an important Wisconsin value," says Daniel Idzikowski, Executive Director. "We are also pleased to see the promised increase in specialized transportation funds for the elderly and people with disabilities who rely on alternative forms of transportation to get to work and to be part of their communities." The budget proposal increases overall transit aids by 4% and specialized transit by 1%.

Many questions remain about implementation of various significant changes in the Governor's request. DRW's main areas of question and concern for people with disabilities include:

- Reductions in Personal Care supports
- Elimination of the IRIS self-directed long-term care program
- Significant changes to Family Care – the state's largest managed care program
- Flat funding in special education and other children's long-term support reforms

Personal Care:

The Governor's proposal to reform personal care services and reduce the program by \$19 million cuts to the heart of intimate daily supports people with disabilities rely upon for things like bathing, dressing, getting meals and going to work. While the Governor intends this initiative to address perceived abuse of the program, DRW requests data on program utilization and information on how the proposed changes will preserve these supports. Personal care services are essential to Wisconsin's commitment to reduce costly institutional care and increase opportunities for community life.

Long-term Care:

The Governor proposes significant changes to essential long-term care programs. DRW has long-advocated for statewide expansion of Family Care and IRIS programs in their current form, due to their emphasis on person-centered, community based supports that help people live, work and be part of their communities. The Governor's proposal would eliminate IRIS, a self-directed program that provides more than 11,000 people with disabilities control over their own budgets to make cost-effective purchases for essential supports. Meanwhile the Governor proposes expanding a new version of Family Care to all 72 counties, while moving administrative functions to the Office of the Commissioner of Insurance, integrating acute and primary care services and transforming the program to operate as an insurance entity. While DRW applauds the statewide implementation of Family Care and supports the proposed "outcomes-based" focus of these reforms, we will advocate for outcomes to include and preserve measures of quality of life including community integration and competitive, community employment.

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Children and Education:

The Governor proposes major changes to long-term care supports for those with significant disabilities, including elimination of the Family Support Program. Impacts of these changes on families are not yet known. In the area of education, schools and students did not receive any increase in special education funding. The state has reneged on its promise of supporting local districts with rising special education costs, flat funding special education for eight years in a row.

Other Issues:

Other impacts of the budget proposal on people with disabilities also remain to be seen. For instance, proposals that would lead to drug testing of people who rely on Medicaid programs, including new testing for those seeking specialized vocational rehabilitation job supports, could have negative and unintended consequences on people with disabilities. New requirements for premium payments for extremely poor people with disabilities and a 48 month limit on basic health care benefits are also concerning and appear likely to increase reliance on costly emergency and institutional care.

“We will work with the legislature to review these proposals and study their efficacy, cost benefit, and impact on people with disabilities.” said Idzikowski.

Disability Rights Wisconsin will continue to advocate for essential improvements for people with disabilities that were not included in this budget proposal. For example, two youth employment proposals – together costing less than \$10 million and supported by school administrators, DPI, autism groups and families statewide – could significantly improve outcomes for youth with disabilities exiting high school and support schools with new targeted “pay for performance” resources.

See here: <http://www.letsgettoworkwi.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/BetterBottomLine-Proposal-sheet.pdf>

DRW will also work to ensure the initiatives included in last year’s Speaker’s Task Force on Mental Health and mental health initiatives included in the last biennial budget are adequately funded to realize the goals of increasing quality, community supports that can prevent costly institutionalization and stigma. In addition, DRW is committed to seeing a reduction in the number of children with significant disabilities (2,300) who are waiting for essential supports.

DRW’s other legislative and budget priorities can be found here:

<http://www.disabilityrightswi.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/DRW-2015-Legislative-Agenda-updated.pdf>

Disability Rights Wisconsin is a private non-profit organization which was founded in 1977. Designated by the Governor to ensure the rights of all state residents with disabilities through individual advocacy and system change, DRW is part of a national system of federally mandated Protection and Advocacy agencies. Disability Rights Wisconsin helps people across Wisconsin gain access to services and opportunity through its advocacy and legal expertise. We regularly challenge systems and society to create positive change and improve the lives of people with disabilities. We support the right of each person to live in dignity and to work and attend school in the mainstream of society.