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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Disability Rights Wisconsin Congratulates DHS on Its New “Suspend Don’t Terminate” Medicaid Policy

(Madison) - Disability Rights Wisconsin is extremely pleased with the Department of Health Services’ announcement that it will no longer terminate Medicaid eligibility for individuals for entering Wisconsin jails and prisons and will suspend their coverage instead. It has been long-standing federal policy to encourage states not to terminate coverage for Medicaid enrollees during their time of incarceration, but rather to temporarily suspend. With today’s announcement Wisconsin has finally removed itself from the small group of states that have not enacted this policy. DRW thanks Governor Evers for advancing this policy change which has been a long-standing priority for mental health advocates. Individuals with mental illness are particularly over-represented in Wisconsin’s jails and prisons.

This change was needed because federal law prohibits the use of federal Medicaid matching funds for services provided to inmates of public institutions. By only suspending Medicaid eligibility for individuals entering jail or prison Wisconsin will be able to reactivate coverage quickly when they are released. Having immediate access to health coverage—particularly mental health services— will vastly increase their chances of successfully reintegrating into society and allow them to quickly access care and medication.

For this to succeed there will need to be extensive coordination between the state’s various correctional systems and the Department of Health Services eligibility-determination system. “We are grateful for all the effort that is going into making this change a reality,” said DRW Executive Director Lea Kitz, “Medicaid opens the door to the care that many individuals need upon release from an institutional stay.”

Quicker connection to Medicaid-covered care in the community can help lower health care costs, hospitalizations and emergency room visits as well as decrease mortality and recidivism for justice-involved individuals. “There is a disproportionately high rate of physical and behavioral health illnesses among justice-involved individuals and allowing Medicaid services to resume seamlessly upon re-entry to the community is extremely important, especially during this pandemic,” said Kit Kerschensteiner, DRW’s Director of Advocacy and Legal Services. “This step by DHS is certain to increase an individual’s opportunity for successful recovery and reintegration into their community.”

Disability Rights Wisconsin is the federally mandated Protection and Advocacy system for the State of Wisconsin, charged with protecting the rights of individuals with disabilities and keeping individuals free from abuse and neglect.

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