Wisconsin Aging | Advocacy | Network

Key Issues for Wisconsin Aging Advocates

2019-2021 State Budget

The Wisconsin 2019-2021 Biennial Budget significantly impacts older adults and caregivers. The Wisconsin Aging Advocacy Network advocates the following positions on key investments that support older adults to improve their health and well-being and live with maximum independence and dignity, and reduce health and long-term care costs.



1. **Expand the Dementia Care Specialist (DCS) program to all aging and disability resource centers (ADRCs) in the state (adding 27 ADRC DCSs and 3 tribal DCSs).**

Financial investment in Dementia Care Specialists has been an effective, low cost approach to providing tremendous reach into local communities. Currently 24 DCSs are serving 21 ADRCs in 34 counties and 3 tribes. DCSs provide specialized education to ADRC staff, providers and families; in-home consultation; volunteer development; and community coalition building. DCSs positively impact individuals and families living with dementia and improve the sustainability of our long-term care system by reducing or eliminating the need for public funding. The DCS program is a wise and sound investment of public dollars. **We support providing $2.8 million annually ($5.6 million in the biennium) to ensure these critical services are accessible to all who need them no matter where they live in Wisconsin.**



2. Increase funding for Specialized Transportation and Transit.

Transportation programs are a critical investment that has not kept pace with the growing number of older adults. On average, we outlive our driving ability by 7-10 years. This is a long time to rely on transportation services that may not exist where we live. Seventy percent of individuals age 50+ live where transit does not exist or serves the area very poorly. **We support a 20% increase for the County Elderly and Disabled Transportation Assistance program (specialized transportation s.85.21), a 10% increase for Tribal Elderly Transportation Assistance (s.85.215), and a 10% increase for the Transit Operating Assistance (s.85.20) program to ensure needed systems and services are available to meet our transportation needs as we age.**

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3. Increase Medicaid provider reimbursements to raise direct care worker wages to an average of $15/hour.

Wisconsin is experiencing a crisis-level shortage of direct care workers (DCWs), leaving older adults and people with disabilities without needed care and families without care options. DCWs help get people out of bed, use the bathroom, get dressed, prepare and eat meals, and other activities necessary for daily living. Despite the essential role DCWs play, there are not enough DCWs to meet the current needs of those served by any of the state's long-term care programs. Those covered by insurance or paying privately for services are also affected. Agencies and facilities report low Medicaid reimbursement rates make it difficult to recruit and retain DCWs, as other local employers—including retail stores and fast food restaurants—provide better pay and benefits (the median hourly wage for homecare workers [2017]—including personal care workers and home health aides was $10.47). **To ensure sufficient quality staff to meet our long-term care needs, we up support an increase in the Medicaid Personal Care (MAPC) agency rate to $23/hour (currently $16.73) and support increases for the direct care and services portion of the capitation rates provided to Family Care MCOs (an additional $30 million over the biennium) and for nursing homes (1.5%/year) targeted to the direct care workforce.**



4. Increase the investment in Healthy Aging Grants.

Wisconsin is home to many evidence-based (researched and proven) health promotion programs that improve health, prevent or delay disease and disability, and delay or entirely prevent the need for expensive long-term care. These programs address critical public health issues including older adult falls, chronic conditions, diabetes, and caregiving. Data shows investments in these programs have saved millions of health care dollars. **To broaden the reach and impact of proven programs, we support an investment of $870,000/year for healthy aging grants to counties/tribes, YMCAs, and other community based organizations for proven programs and to support a statewide clearinghouse and support center.**

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5. Create a Caregiver Tax Credit (Credit for Caring Act).

Caregivers spend thousands of dollars ($7,000 on average) out of their own pockets each year to meet the care needs of loved ones. Many of these caregivers need to reduce their own living expenses to cover caregiving expenses—like assistive technology, medical supplies, and adult day services. Family caregivers enable our older family members and friends to stay at home, where costs are lowest and where they want to be. They perform a variety of caregiving duties—including help with bathing, dressing, feeding, medication management, wound care, and transportation. Caregivers often must make life-altering decisions about where to live, whether to reduce their work hours, change jobs, and/or even leave the workforce to attend to caregiving responsibilities. **We support creation of a caregiver tax credit to provide financial relief to caregivers, enable older adults to remain at home with support from family members, and save money for both individuals and the state.**



6. Increase state funding for the Elder Benefit Specialist (EBS) program.

The EBS Program provides a wide range of important legal advocacy services to adults age 60 + across Wisconsin. EBSs provide benefit counseling and assistance with appeals in the areas of Medicare, Medicaid, other health insurance coverage issues, Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, FoodShare, housing, and consumer debt. There has been an estimated 63% growth in Wisconsin's age 60+ population from 2000 to 2020. Despite significant population growth, increasing demand for EBS services, and increasing complexities associated with access to essential benefit programs, the EBS program has not seen an increase in state funding in 22 years. Last year, the average annual monetary impact of one full-time EBS to clients and the community through public benefit program eligibility, overpayment resolution, medical insurance appeals, and other positive outcomes was over $2.3 million and over $192 million statewide. **To ensure access to legal advocacy services for Wisconsin's fastest growing population, we support increasing state funding for the Elder Benefit Specialist (EBS) program from $2,298,400 to $4,596,800.**