



## **Proposed Medicaid Cuts Devastating for Children with Disabilities**

An Opinion from Liz Hecht (Belleville) and Lynn Renner (Madison)

As families who have children with disabilities or special health care needs, we are extremely concerned about proposed cuts to Medicaid included in the health care reform proposals being debated in Congress. While Congress has postponed their vote in response to constituent concerns, we realize that major changes in health care are not going away and efforts to repeal and replace “Obamacare” are still a top priority in Congress. Although changing Medicaid was not part of the “mandate” to reform healthcare, it is central to current plans.

According to estimates by the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office, the House and Senate bills would reduce health care coverage for 22-25 million people and result in \$880-\$772 billion in cuts to Medicaid over 10 years. This cut amounts to roughly a \$1 billion loss in Medicaid funds for Wisconsin.

The impact of these cuts along with removal of federal protections for access to pediatric services, puts all children at risk and in particular those with disabilities. Medicaid is a health insurance program that provides coverage for close to 520,000 children in Wisconsin; 43% of Medicaid enrollees are children. At least 1 in 5 of these children has a disability or special health care need and more than 10,000 have the most significant disabilities like cerebral palsy, autism or Down syndrome.

In his recent editorial in the New York Times, Senator Ron Johnson asks us to trust free market competition to improve health care quality, access and innovation. For our families, commercial insurance has never provided the comprehensive coverage our children need. This had nothing to do with Obamacare. The “free market” does not work for our children. They have exceptional health care needs that commercial insurance plans rarely cover. Our experience is that the “free market” takes every opportunity to exclude services for our children using preexisting condition exclusions, lifetime caps and limited to no coverage of services such as habilitative services, those designed to help children learn skills like walking, eating and talking.

Wisconsin Medicaid includes many optional benefits that commercial insurance does not offer, resulting in a comprehensive health care plan for children with disabilities and chronic conditions. The proposals before Congress allow states to eliminate optional Medicaid services like home nursing care, therapies and special equipment and community-based supports. These

programs and services are critically important so children can live with their families in their own communities.

Families like ours already have higher out of pocket costs for healthcare, spend more than average for non-covered services and spend more time than most families coordinating care. Without Medicaid-funded programs, families face crushing medical debt, loss of employment and the risk of care in an institution in order to get access to the medical services our children need. Medicaid programs like the Children's Long-Term Support waivers and the Katie Beckett Program allow our families to work, pay taxes, participate in our communities and care for our children at home.

Per capita caps could "lock in" lower spending levels. According to a recent Kaiser Family Foundation report, Wisconsin has the 3<sup>rd</sup> lowest Medicaid spending on children with disabilities in the country, in part due to a strong commitment to Medicaid programs that keep children with their families rather than in institutions. In fact, the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee recently approved Medicaid funding to eliminate the wait list for children with the most significant disabilities, a commitment that could be jeopardized by current federal proposals. Per capita caps would make it more difficult for Wisconsin to address inequities, provider shortages or public health crises in the future.

We believe access to quality healthcare is a fundamental social commitment we as a society can afford to make to each other, just as we have done with access to education for all children and health care for seniors. We stand ready to work together to improve healthcare for the most vulnerable among us. We ask our Members of Congress to work with families who have children with disabilities and the disability community to craft legislation that benefits the thousands of children with disabilities and special health care needs in Wisconsin.

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