



TO: Senate Committee on Health
FROM: Ashleigh Spitz, Clinical Dietician; Mark Rakowski, President, Chorus Community Health Plans, Children's Wisconsin
DATE: Tuesday, February 6, 2024
RE: Support for SB 948 – Healthy food incentive program and SB 953/952– Childhood obesity prevention and management grants

My name is Ashleigh Spitz and I am a clinical dietician at Children's Wisconsin (Children's). I appreciate the opportunity to share perspectives on behalf of a number of departments at Children's, including on behalf of Mark Rakowski, President of Chorus Community Health Plans (CCHP), an affiliate of Children's Wisconsin. On behalf of Children's and CCHP, we'd like to share our support for the healthy food incentive program and obesity prevention and management grants. I want to thank Chair Cabral-Guevara and members of this Committee for the opportunity to share our perspectives.

I also want to acknowledge and thank Assembly Speaker Robin Vos for establishing the Task Force on Childhood Obesity and recognizing the importance of this issue and to Task Force Chair Representative Karen Hurd and Vice-Chair Representative Robyn Vining for their dedication to this issue.

Many of you are familiar with Children's, with our top pediatric hospital and clinical care, primary care and urgent care offices, CCHP, various community health programs, child well-being services and more. Children's vision is to have Wisconsin kids be the healthiest in the nation and in striving to achieve this ambitious vision, we recognize that most of the drivers of a child's health and well-being are often reflected in the social, cultural and environmental factors that surround a child and their family.

Together, the bills heard today as part of the Speaker's Task Force on Childhood Obesity, go hand-in-hand in making strides to address children's nutrition, health and overall well-being. Supporting healthy nutrition and preventive health care are all key aspects to promoting wellness among our children across the environments where they spend a majority of their time. We also recognize that mental health is just as important as physical health, and that supporting kids to achieve healthy bodies should be done in a way that is patient-centered and respectful.

Like other hospitals, we conduct a community health needs assessment (CHNA) every three years to understand our communities' most pressing health priorities for kids. The communities who surround both our Milwaukee hospital and our Neenah hospital have highlighted overweight, obesity and addressing social determinants of health as top priorities for their children's health. Children's is involved in community coalitions in Milwaukee and the Fox Valley who are dedicated to promoting healthy eating, active living and addressing childhood obesity. Supporting families in accessing healthy foods to create nutritious meals, providing education and resources to families to support their child's health, and ensuring children are active each day all contribute to positive health outcomes – physically, mentally, emotionally and socially.

Children's offers e-learning programs at no cost to schools across the state on several health topics, including health and wellness. Children's Mission: Health e-learning program provides students in grades K-8 with a fun, interactive way to learn how to establish healthy habits, increase physical activity and

avoid childhood obesity. Mission: Health aligns with Wisconsin and National Health Education Standards and focuses on teaching students age-appropriate material. Children's also has school nurses in 10 Milwaukee Public Schools who support health education for students, staff, and families with healthy meal nights and classroom physical activity breaks. Children's has also implemented the Nourishing Partners Program which screens families who come into our Emergency Department to identify their food access needs. We then provide immediate financial support for Children's cafeteria as well as follow-up connections to food and other community resources.

Children's also offers The NEW (Nutrition, Exercise and Weight Management) Kids Program for children ages 2 to 18 with medical conditions related to an elevated body mass index (BMI) – like high cholesterol, elevated liver enzymes, or high blood pressure – or who are gaining weight too quickly. A dedicated team of health professionals works to provide a customized care plan designed specifically for each child focused on establishing both a healthier lifestyle and positive eating habits.

Recently, our team at Children's has been working on a pilot program testing the integration of registered dietitians into the primary care setting to bring care upstream to patients. Similar to what we have done for mental and behavioral health, we are testing how we can seamlessly provide children and their caregivers with the guidance, education and resources they need to promote nutrition, health and wellness. This focus on prevention and early intervention is aligned with Children's strategy around transforming child and adolescent health.

For several years, CCHP, who provides more than 160,000 Wisconsinites with BadgerCare and individual and family plans, has been involved in efforts to improve nutrition education and promote healthy eating and fresh food access among their members. These include grants from the City of Milwaukee Fresh Food Access Fund program, supporting various farmers markets with matching funds to incentivize fresh produce purchases and providing access to tele-nutrition services to their members at no cost. While many families struggled with food insecurity before the pandemic, we've seen this need exacerbated with more families participating in FoodShare (SNAP) including many who have children.

SB 948 would enable families using FoodShare to purchase fruits and vegetables at eligible retailers to receive an additional amount to spend on future healthy purchases. Importantly, funds for this project have previously been allocated for a similar pilot effort that was not implemented. We also advocated in support of Milwaukee County's Market Match program – a very similar model to the one outlined in this legislation.

Food insecurity is much more common among households that have low incomes, are headed by a single parent, have limited education levels, or are predominantly Black and Hispanic. In fact, according to the Wisconsin Food Security Project, the disparity in food security between Black and White households in Wisconsin is among the largest in the country. Supporting families in purchasing more healthy food options through a healthy food incentive program provides an opportunity to address key health inequities in our community. Importantly, families from all walks of life and from all parts of our state face challenges in accessing healthy foods for a variety of reasons. While many existing federal, state and local programs are key to supporting kids and families in accessing food they need, we know that families continue to face barriers and AB 1013 would be one way to support more families by directly investing in the purchase of nutritious foods.

Incentive programs have been demonstrated to increase participants' consumption of fruits and vegetables. For every dollar that a family spends on healthy food, they get another dollar to spend on

more healthy food. We're all familiar with the benefits of a healthy diet – especially for children – to grow, develop, learn and thrive. Healthy meals can reduce risks of obesity, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, stress and mental illness. However, fresh vegetables and fruit are often expensive, putting healthier options out of reach for many. That's why efforts like this one are critical to extending families' dollars further to support healthy food purchases.

In addition to supporting families with healthy food, families should also be supported with the knowledge, education and skills to use these healthy foods in a way that works for their family, their culture and their lifestyle. While what we put into our bodies is critically important to our overall health and well-being, so too is looking holistically at all factors of health to ensure children are on a healthy trajectory. SB 953 and SB 952 outline opportunities to fund a variety of stakeholders who are working to prevent childhood obesity and support weight management. In pediatrics we often focus on prevention, leaning into upstream efforts to screen for any concerns and provide early interventions as necessary to support health and well-being.

Whether its efforts like this one that are typically not reimbursable by insurance, or efforts happening in schools, child care settings and other community organizations, the funding outlined in SB 953 and SB 952 would help support healthy weight management among Wisconsin children.

The proposals outlined today speak to important aspects of kid's health and well-being. No one approach will address this issue holistically – it takes a spectrum of efforts across many settings to help support children and their families. I ask for your support of these proposals to help promote nutrition and health and well-being among children and their families. Thank you for your consideration.

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