Lifting Children Up

2022 Advocacy Priorities: Pandemic Recovery and Beyond

Children’s Hospital Colorado
Here, it’s different.
Two years into the global pandemic, the impacts of COVID-19 continue to echo throughout families, communities, schools, clinics and hospitals, and political institutions from city council chambers to the Colorado State Capitol to the United States Congress. The number of changes for children and youth over the last two years have been staggering, and the long-term effects of the global pandemic on child and community health are still not fully known.

As we turn to the extensive advocacy needs on the horizon for Children’s Hospital Colorado (Children’s Colorado) and the patients and families we serve, the Government Affairs team remains committed to pandemic recovery policies in 2022 that address not only immediate needs but also longer-term, systemic solutions for the future. As always, we will pursue our policy and advocacy work in partnership with kids and families, our team members, child health advocacy partners and the broader healthcare community.

Now more than ever, lifting children up and supporting healthy kids through public policy remains an integral part of caring for children and a core part of our mission at Children’s Colorado. It’s up to all of us to come together and speak up for public policies that can impact the lives of kids and families during this time of pandemic recovery and beyond.
Mental Health

Fighting for kids to get their fair share in the state budget

In May 2021, Children's Colorado declared a State of Emergency for Youth Mental Health. In November 2021, Children's Colorado joined with community partners to release a children and youth mental health playbook urging immediate action to address the ongoing crisis and providing funding and policy options for policymakers at the local, state and federal levels. Right now, Colorado has a once in a lifetime opportunity to invest in children's mental health. To help states with the economic and broader social impacts of COVID-19, Congress passed the American Rescue Plan Act in early 2021. Legislative leadership and Governor Jared Polis have committed to spending $450 million of this unique, one-time funding during the 2022 legislative session to build a better mental health system for all Coloradans.

Together with a broad coalition of advocates, we will fight to ensure that at least one-third—or $150 million—of this funding is specifically allocated to the needs of children and youth. Children and youth make up one-third of the state’s population and deserve at least their fair share, and we know that investments in the health and wellbeing of young people often pay lifelong dividends.

Funds would strengthen workforce and caregiver supports through trainings, scholarships and loan forgiveness as well as expand the care continuum to ensure a broad array of mental health services are available in Colorado. From prevention to crisis support and residential treatment, the goal is to build a cohesive mental health system so families served by multiple programs experience seamless coordination.

Strengthening the accountability and unity of the mental health system for kids

We also recognize Colorado must go further than simply ensuring kids get their fair share of mental health funding. As the state implements the recommendations of Governor Polis’ Behavioral Health Transformation Task Force, Children’s Colorado will work with state agencies and other stakeholders on the creation of a new Behavioral Health Administration. The goal of the new state entity is to align all state-funded mental health and substance use programs—importantly, including benefits and services provided for children covered by Medicaid—to reduce bureaucracy and fragmentation of services for Coloradans. The Behavioral Health Administration will also oversee and be accountable for policy, strategy and services for all children and youth. A centralized agency is badly needed to unify the mental health system in Colorado but getting the details right will be vitally important. Through it all, Children’s Colorado will defend our advocacy priority that the needs of children and youth are prioritized at every level in the development of this new agency.
Advocating for Local Mental Health Services

Local governments have also received funding from Congress through the American Rescue Plan Act. In 2022, we will continue to partner with community advocates to ask Aurora City Council to allocate federal relief dollars and consider sustainable, long-term funding options to grow mental health services and supports for Aurora residents. In addition, we will continue to encourage other local communities in Colorado to respond to the youth mental health emergency and address the critical needs at the local level.
Access to Care

In the upcoming legislative session, we will defend Colorado’s Medicaid program, which covers over 625,000 children—about half of all kids—in our state.

We will continue to advocate that Colorado Medicaid provide sustainable access to breakthrough high-cost drugs and medicines for children with rare and serious health conditions.

We will also work to safeguard and expand children’s access to both public and private health insurance, work with policymakers to ensure stable coverage during the ongoing pandemic, and ensure that Colorado’s Medicaid program serves children the best it can.

We will stand up for kids’ unique healthcare needs as Colorado prepares to launch the “Colorado Option” health insurance plan lawmakers created in 2021.

We will also continue to defend policies that enhance access to lifesaving vaccines, including COVID-19 vaccines.
Standing with Our Dedicated Healthcare Workforce

Healthcare providers have faced tremendous challenges over the past two years, and the strain on the workforce is apparent.

Countless industries across the state are stretched due to workforce shortages, and the healthcare industry has been especially hard hit. As state lawmakers consider policies like healthcare professional tax credits, loan repayment programs and other mechanisms to attract more people to work in healthcare, we will support thoughtful policy solutions in partnership with our team members, higher education institutions, the healthcare partners and business communities.
Advocating for a Healthy and Strong Start in Early Childhood

The early years of a child’s life are the chance for a healthy and strong start that can set a foundation for lifelong health and wellbeing.

In 2021, we were proud to support a law initiating the creation of a state agency to oversee early childhood programs including preschool and early childhood mental health programs. Formalizing this new agency will come together as part of a new law in 2022, and we will advocate to ensure the new Department of Early Childhood integrates health and wellbeing into the design of this new state agency.
Federal Priorities

In addition to our state-level priorities, we are working to advance child health at the federal level in Washington, D.C. In 2022 we aim to make progress on the following:

A national strategy for children and youth behavioral health

Children’s Colorado will partner with a coalition of children’s hospitals and other providers and advocates around the country to urge Congress to provide robust support for children and youth mental health in any future major legislative package. This national legislation will include addressing mental health insurance parity to ensure equitable access to care for kids and families, enhancing the mental health workforce, funding for children’s hospitals to increase capacity to provide child and youth mental health services and supporting mental health and primary care integration and coordination. Funding could also be used to support workforce training for a range of pediatric mental health professionals. The goal is to provide immediate resources to hospitals caring for children in acute crisis situations while also building toward system changes that drive prevention and early intervention efforts.

Ensuring future COVID recovery legislation benefits kids

Children’s Hospital Colorado applauds the U.S. House of Representatives for passing key policies included in the Build Back Better Act designed to improve children’s healthcare coverage, improve health outcomes and address social determinants of health. Any COVID recovery legislation passed by Congress ought to include the following:

- **Make CHIP permanent:** The Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) is a long-standing and successful program that has dramatically reduced the number of uninsured children since its creation in the 1990s. Permanently authorizing CHIP will ensure stable coverage for the 9 million children, and lower-income pregnant women, who rely on the program for high-quality, affordable coverage.
- **Expand coverage and improve maternal health:** Nationally, a combined 46 million children rely on Medicaid and CHIP for healthcare coverage. Ensuring that both programs include stable, 12-month continuous eligibility for children is a critical step to reduce coverage gaps in states that have not put in place these coverage protections already (Colorado has already adopted this, but Wyoming and other states have not). The addition of 12-month continuous eligibility for pregnant women and coverage for 12 months postpartum will help to safeguard the health of mothers and children alike.

Funding for Children’s Hospital Graduate Medical Education (CHGME): Half of all pediatric residents trained annually do their training at about one percent of the nation’s hospitals: children’s hospitals. The CHGME program helps support children’s hospitals in training over 7,000 pediatric residents each year. Including an increase of the House-passed $200 million for CHGME in the Build Back Better package will strengthen and grow the pediatric workforce and improve access to care for all children. The importance of investing in pediatric workforce training programs has never been clearer as we respond to the spread of COVID-19 within our communities and a worsening mental health crisis among children and adolescents.

- **Social determinants of health:** Securing a healthy future for children means more than ensuring their access to healthcare. We must also support their healthy development by ensuring basic needs are met and they have safe, stable, supportive environments in which to learn and grow. Children’s Colorado supports the provisions in the Build Back Better package that will reduce child poverty and give kids a healthy start, such as extending and expanding the Child Tax Credit.

Supporting pediatric infrastructure—now and into the future

Children’s hospitals are the nation’s health care safety net for all kids, providing nearly all specialized care for children. Many children’s hospitals have not yet recovered from significant financial damage experienced early in the pandemic, weakening the pediatric healthcare system’s preparedness. Over the summer and fall, an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases in children, an atypical early onset of respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and an ongoing crisis in children’s mental health have further strained pediatric care capacity. It is essential that children’s hospitals are directly included in any support for hospital infrastructure within any recovery package.
Building federal support for local health equity work initiative

Children’s Colorado has recently developed a Black Health Initiative (BHI) to improve patient and family experiences and health outcomes, especially for our Black community. To conceptualize and pilot programs to address infant mortality and prematurity in the Black community caused by the systemic racism often experienced by Black moms and their families, Children’s Colorado is collaborating directly with Black families and community members, in partnership with the University of Colorado School of Medicine and the Center for Advancing Professional Excellence. The lived experiences of our Black families and community members are integral to this effort, which includes two key components: peer-to-peer support for Black moms and a simulated scenario training for providers.

For the first time in a decade, in 2021 Congress reopened the opportunity to pursue federal funding requests for local community projects, and the Government Affairs team has collaborated with the BHI team and U.S. Representative Jason Crow, as well as U.S. Senators Michael Bennet and John Hickenlooper, to request federal funding to support and expand the vital BHI work. While no final decision has been made, Congressman Crow successfully advocated to include funding in the draft House Appropriations bill, and we are hopeful that final funding will be allocated early in 2022.

Cultivating a new generation of childhood medical researchers

In 2021, we worked diligently with other children’s hospital members of the Coalition for Pediatric Medical Research to re-introduce the Pediatricians Accelerate Childhood Therapies (PACT) Act in both chambers (S. 1357 / H.R. 3773). This legislation would establish a new career development award for early-career pediatric researchers striving for research independence. In 2022, we aim to build support in both chambers and advance these bills through the process to ensure that children can benefit from the lifesaving and breakthrough treatments developed by the nation’s next generation of top pediatric physician-scientists.

Visit us online or get in touch to become a member of the Child Health Champions network and learn more about Children’s Colorado’s policy and advocacy efforts.

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