Lifting Children Up

2021 Policy and Advocacy Priorities

Children’s Hospital Colorado
Here, it’s different.
A Glance at Advocacy in 2021

As with almost everything this past year, advocacy looked different in 2020. We saw policymaking accelerate at a remarkable pace as elected officials and staff at every level of government scrambled to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. While some laws and programs were quickly and effectively modified to meet new demands, many other systems strained under the weight of the public health crisis, exacerbating the suffering of families in need. Decision-makers at the local, state and federal levels addressed only the most pressing issues, leaving other important work unfinished. There was also a major shift in the nuts and bolts of advocacy—citizen testimony and lobbying had to be done remotely, limiting access and transparency and muffling the voices of those who most needed to be heard.

Speaking up for kids will continue to be different in 2021, in ways we can’t yet fully anticipate. What we do know is that our advocacy mission here at Children’s Hospital Colorado will not change — we will still strive to represent the needs of kids and their families, no matter what the new year holds. Advocacy is an integral part of caring for children and a core part of our mission, and our Government Affairs team champions evidence-based public policy at all levels of government. Through direct lobbying, grassroots and coalition organizing, and traditional and social media, we strive to represent the interests of the organization, our team members, our patients and families, and the health and well-being of all children.

Following the 2020 election, there have been some shifts in the makeup of the state and federal legislatures that could influence how public policy moves forward. In Colorado, Democrats maintained their control of the House and gained a seat in the Senate, attaining a 20-15 majority. At the federal level, control of the presidency will switch to Democrats as President-elect Joe Biden takes office in January. Democrats will hold narrow control of both chambers of Congress, with a slim majority in the House of Representatives and Vice President Kamala Harris breaking the new 50-50 tie in the Senate in favor of the Democrats.

In light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, our advocacy efforts at the state level will focus on support for behavioral health in the state budget, as well as issues related to access to care, health disparities, early childhood, immunizations, school health, tobacco control, healthcare workforce and more. We’ll also work on federal policy priorities like advocating for COVID-19 relief funding and strengthening Medicaid for children and families. We look forward to building partnerships with our allies and advocates across the state, engaging our healthcare professionals and other team members, and giving voice to our patients and their families as we all navigate these challenging times together.
Below are Children's Colorado’s planned priorities for 2021:

**Fighting for Healthcare Programs and Behavioral Health in the State Budget**

The 2021 legislative session will be challenging in large part because of the state’s mounting budget crisis brought on by the pandemic. Cuts to healthcare and important programs are being contemplated at the same time that more and more Coloradans need these critical services. We see every day the struggles of the families we serve, and we also appreciate the financial hardship community pediatricians and other primary care practices are experiencing. As legislators reconvene and the state budget process moves forward, we will be fighting to protect kids’ health priorities in the budget and funding for programs that support families during this trying time.

Colorado is in a state of crisis for child and youth behavioral health. Suicide is the leading cause of death for young people ages 10-24, and an estimated one out of every six teens has a diagnosable behavioral health condition. That’s why, starting in 2019, we led the push for reform, culminating in the passage of Senate Bill 19-195. That bipartisan measure formed a foundation to better serve Colorado children, youth and families, while reducing avoidable out-of-home placements. However, the legislature stripped funding for these important reforms while wrangling with the state’s COVID-19 budget crisis in 2020. In 2021, we will work to restore funding for Senate Bill 19-195 and successfully advance the bill’s comprehensive “Wraparound” care coordination benefit for children and youth with significant behavioral health needs, with an emphasis on getting kids the right care at the right time.

**Protecting Coverage and Access for All Children**

We will continue to defend Colorado’s Medicaid program, champion children’s access to care during the public health emergency, and ensure Medicaid works as well as it can for children and youth in Colorado. We will partner with state and federal leaders to ensure Medicaid coverage remains stable for all who count on it, and we will protect advancements made in telehealth coverage that have improved access to care during the pandemic. Finally, we will continue to press Medicaid for sustainable coverage of new and emerging high-cost drugs.

**Improving Behavioral Healthcare Services for Kids**

This is an exciting time for children’s behavioral health policy, as the state works to implement the recommendations of Governor Polis’ Behavioral Health Task Force. After prioritizing the 148 recommendations from the subcommittees, the Task Force determined recommendations would be implemented in three phases. In 2021, we will engage with state agencies and other stakeholders to support phase one implementation: the creation of a behavioral health administration that integrates all state-funded behavioral health programs—importantly, including those within Medicaid—to reduce bureaucracy and fragmentation of services for Coloradans. Additionally, phase one includes efforts to expand and increase tele-behavioral health services and identify new funding sources to implement task force recommendations in light of the economic situation.
Addressing Health Disparities

The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated and exacerbated the longstanding health disparities that afflict Black, Indigenous, Hispanic and Latino communities and other communities of color. Individuals in these communities are more likely to be infected with and killed by the virus because they are more likely to be essential workers or unable to work remotely. They are also more likely to have limited access to healthcare and more likely to have underlying health conditions that stem from systemic racism and policies that do not prioritize health equity. Many families have experienced job and income loss, housing and food insecurity — among myriad other challenges — as a result of the pandemic. We will work at the state and federal levels to make sure every Coloradan, regardless of factors like income, zip code, race and immigration status, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and mental and physical ability have the opportunities and resources needed to achieve optimal health, within and beyond the healthcare realm.

Ensuring a Strong Start for Our Youngest Coloradans

A child’s first experiences and relationships set the foundation for development, learning and success in school and in life. Families have always needed access to safe and affordable child care, but never more so than in 2020. In 2021, we’ll support early childhood partners on efforts to expand access to child care and grow the early childhood educator workforce, in addition to supporting the development of a quality, universal preschool program in the state with funding from the newly passed Proposition EE, which taxed tobacco and nicotine products to invest in cessation and early childhood programs.

Another important issue in 2021 will be the restoration of state funding for family planning services, especially now, as many are pursuing options to reduce unintended pregnancies in light of the economic and health impacts of the pandemic. And finally, we’ll support strategies related to improving maternal health and decreasing infant and maternal mortality.
Continuing to Push for Strong Vaccine Policies

Now more than ever, our children, families and all Coloradans need protection from harmful and deadly infectious diseases. That’s why in the 2020 legislative session, we joined forces with pro-vaccine advocates around the state, under the banner of the Colorado Vaccinates Coalition, to pass Senate Bill 20-163. We are committed to seeing the new law implemented fully to improve our state’s lagging childhood immunization rates, which have suffered even more during the pandemic. In the year ahead, we will defend against any legislative attempts to weaken access to immunizations that support the health and safety of kids across Colorado.

Supporting Safe Back-to-School Efforts

School provides children with more than just academic learning in subjects like reading, writing and math. Children also develop social and emotional skills, enjoy physical activity and have access to a safe place with trusted, caring adults. Many kids also get the majority of their healthy meals at schools. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact the ability of students to learn in-person. In 2021, we’ll partner with the Governor’s Back-to-School Task Force, the American Academy of Pediatrics, Colorado Chapter, and allies in the education community to support safe, in-person learning, so that teachers can teach, and students can learn and thrive, without raising the risk of spreading the virus.

Another important aspect of school health is the toll that the pandemic has taken on the behavioral health and well-being of kids. They’re more isolated from friends and peers, and they’re navigating unusual routines, virtual learning and changing schedules. Increased behavioral health support for kids in school, whether in-person or virtual, will continue to be a high priority going into another year of living in a global pandemic.
2021 POLICY AND ADVOCACY PRIORITIES

Confronting Tobacco and Nicotine Addiction in Teens
Over the past year, Children’s Colorado has helped achieve major policy wins to help curb smoking and vaping addiction among teens. In 2020, we worked with public health partners to increase the age of sales for tobacco and e-cigarette products to 21, and we were strong supporters of the statewide ballot measure Proposition EE, which passed by a wide margin and will increase the tax on tobacco products and create a tax for nicotine products. We know that raising taxes on tobacco and vape products helps people — particularly our teens — quit using and discourages them from ever starting.

Despite these recent victories, we’re still seeing nearly 26 percent of Colorado high schoolers currently vaping. E-cigarette manufacturers use flavors like mint, mango, gummy bear and cotton candy to attract teens, and studies show these flavored tobacco products are the most successful in hooking youth on nicotine. In 2021, we’ll join public health partners to push for local flavor bans that end the sale of all flavored e-cigarette and tobacco products, eliminating a major source of nicotine demand among young people.

Strengthening the Healthcare Workforce
We will support legislation and rulemaking to protect the frontline healthcare workers who are more crucial than ever to our health and safety. We will elevate the needs of kids, pediatricians and child health specialists in conversations on scope of practice, ensuring children are being cared for by the providers who can best meet their needs.

Pressing Congress for Provider COVID-19 Funding Relief

The pandemic has caused significant financial damage in many sectors, including healthcare and children's hospitals, which have struggled under the weight of losses resulting from drops in volumes and increased costs for screening, testing and personal protective equipment. There are heightened challenges for safety net providers like Children's Colorado who rely heavily on Medicaid. While we are thankful for the provider relief funding Congress has appropriated to date in response to COVID-19, we will keep pressing federal lawmakers for additional dollars to support state budgets, enhance federal Medicaid matching funds, provide ongoing relief for primary care offices and other providers, and offset the damage of the pandemic on the operations of children's hospitals.

Defending and Expanding Medicaid and CHIP

We will also work with Congress and the Biden administration to keep the pediatric healthcare infrastructure viable long after the pandemic, especially for the children who rely on public insurance like Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) for their access to care. We will work with our delegation to increase the federal Medicaid match rate to mitigate pressure on state Medicaid programs to cut payments to providers, which would hurt children and threaten the sustainability of the healthcare workforce. In 2020, Congress enacted a temporary 6.2% increase to the match rate. Given the scope of the challenges facing the healthcare system, we support and will advocate for a temporary increase of at least 12% in each state’s match rate.

Advocating for the Accelerating Kids’ Access to Care Act

As part of the Public Health Emergency, CMS has offered states flexibility on certain provider screening requirements, enabling children's hospitals to treat critically ill children transferred to them because the child’s care needs were best met, and in many cases could only be met, by specialized out-of-state pediatric providers. The Accelerating Kids' Access to Care Act is bipartisan federal legislation that would establish a streamlined screening and enrollment pathway for providers being asked to care for kids from other states who are covered by Medicaid or CHIP, if certain program integrity requirements are met. By enacting this legislation, Congress can facilitate access to care and remove burdens on providers while strengthening program integrity.

Enhancing Behavioral Health Efforts

We are working with a coalition of children's hospitals around the country to develop a strategy at the federal level for enhancing children's behavioral healthcare. In the short-term, we will work with our federal delegation to include children's behavioral health funding in the next COVID-19 disaster relief package. 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 and avoid utilization of more expensive levels of care. We will work closely with our partners to expand access to the continuum of care and ensure the system is designed specifically to enhance the strengths and support the needs of children, youth, and families.

Advancing Critical Childhood Research

In the new Congress, we will work with other children’s hospital members of the Coalition for Pediatric Medical Research to re-introduce the Pediatricians Accelerate Childhood Therapies (PACT) Act. This legislation would address certain challenges in the pediatric workforce by establishing a new career development award focused on early-career pediatric researchers who have not yet achieved research independence, with additional consideration given to researchers of diverse backgrounds who have traditionally been underrepresented in the field. Success will mean that children can benefit from the lifesaving and breakthrough treatments developed by the nation’s next generation of top pediatric physician-scientists.
We can only achieve these priorities with the ongoing support of our team members and healthcare providers, grassroots advocacy network Child Health Champions, patients and families, and community partners. Together, we can give voice to Colorado’s kids and families, lifting them up so they can reach their highest potential.
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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