

Lifting Children Up

2021 Policy and Advocacy Priorities Recap



At Children's Hospital Colorado, advocacy is a core part of our mission. That means speaking up for patient and families, kids in our community and kids across the country to ensure every child has the opportunity to grow up healthy and strong. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, advocacy continued to look different in 2021. Colorado's state legislature reconvened January 13 for three days to swear in new members and address urgent business before pausing due to the public health emergency. Lawmakers then returned to the State Capitol in mid-February to complete their legislative session, which wrapped up on June 8. Children's Hospital Colorado's advocacy work this year helped advance COVID-19 relief, along with a number of policy goals that will improve the broader health and well-being of children and families.

Throughout the 2021 Colorado state legislative session, the Children's Colorado Government Affairs team:



Actively tracked **128** state bills



Coordinated virtual or written testimony from **31** experts on pending legislation at committee hearings



Trained **130** new advocates at our 10th annual Speak Up for Kids Day, held virtually this year



Empowered constituents to send almost **200** emails to state lawmakers on pending kids' health legislation

We fought for healthcare programs and behavioral health in the state budget



In Colorado, 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 systemic reform, culminating in the passage of **Senate Bill 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 trying to balance the state's budget during the economic crisis in 2020. In 2021, we successfully restored funding for **Senate Bill 195** to

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. We also worked with partners to improve Medicaid provider rates and achieved a 2.5% increase. This funding boost will make up for ground that was lost during the pandemic and help community pediatric practices serve more children covered by Colorado Medicaid. We vigorously defended funding for Children's Colorado's KidStreet, Medical Day Treatment, and Pediatric Mental Health Institute programs, all of which are one-of-a-kind programs and vital for the patients they serve.

We protected coverage and access for all children



This year, we defended children's access to care as the legislature debated ways to lower the cost of health insurance in Colorado. We had major concerns about **House Bill 1232**, the Colorado Option proposal, but worked with advocates and lawmakers to ensure the unique needs of children—and their healthcare providers—were

better accounted for in the final version of the bill. We supported **House Bill 1190** to further expand Medicaid access to telehealth services. We have continued to fight for equal access to new and emerging high-cost drugs and therapies for children covered by Colorado Medicaid.

We confronted tobacco and nicotine addiction in teens



Despite major policy wins to help curb smoking and vaping addiction among teens over the past few years, nearly 26 percent of Colorado high schoolers are still currently vaping. This year, we joined public health partners to push for a local flavor ban in Loveland that would have ended the sale of all flavored e-cigarette and tobacco products, eliminating a major source of nicotine demand among young people. Although we were disappointed to see the Loveland

ordinance fail by a narrow margin in a City Council vote, we will continue to work with our partners in other key localities, such as Denver, to ban flavors that entice youth to use tobacco products. We're also monitoring the implementation of House Bill 20-1001, which passed in 2020 to increase the age of sales for tobacco and e-cigarette products to 21, ensuring this law is implemented with fidelity and in a way that holds tobacco retailers accountable.

We improved behavioral healthcare services for kids



This year we worked with partners to build a better system of care for all children, youth and families. **House Bill 1097** helps implement a key recommendation of the Colorado Behavioral Health Task Force to create a Behavioral Health Administration, a new state agency to lead, promote and coordinate Colorado's behavioral health priorities. We also worked to expand access to behavioral health care for children and youth. We supported **House Bill 1021** to fund behavioral health services provided by peer support professionals and **House Bill 1258**, which provides access to three telehealth therapy appointments for all school-aged children regardless of insurance coverage. We backed **House Bill 1130** to expand the Transition Specialist Program, which helps individuals transition from hospitals back into the community and

lowers rates of re-hospitalization and incarceration. In the closing days of the session, we fought to increase the state's behavioral health funding through **Senate Bill 137**, the Behavioral Health Recovery Act. Among many things, this important measure jump-starts transformational investments, including a statewide care coordination infrastructure and supports workforce development. The bill also funds urgently-needed direct services to help children immediately, like funding to crisis services for children and youth, and supporting additional bed capacity at step-down residential facilities so that children aren't sent out of state to access the care they need. In 2022, the legislature plans to spend an additional \$300-450 million in federal American Recovery Act Plan funds on behavioral health needs in Colorado.

We sought to advance health equity and reduce health disparities



The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated longstanding health inequities that stem from systemic racism and affect Black, Indigenous, Latinx communities and people of color. As part of Children's Colorado's diversity, health equity and inclusion (DHEI) strategy, we took our work in health equity policy to new heights this session by supporting several bills to address disparities. **House Bill 1105** creates a sustainable funding model for people with low incomes who need help paying their gas and electric bills. **House Bill 1108** adds a person's gender identity or expression to Colorado's anti-discrimination protections. **House Bill 1117**, **House Bill 1121** and **Senate Bill 173**, taken together, work to improve the availability

and affordability of stable housing for renters in our state. **House Bill 1194** creates a statewide Immigration Legal Defense Fund for non-profits to provide needed assistance to our immigrant neighbors during proceedings. And **Senate Bill 181** will strengthen the State's investment in addressing health disparities. In addition, the Black Health Initiative was convened at Children's Hospital Colorado in 2019 to promote quality healthcare and mental well-being by increasing positive patient experiences and empowerment for Black mothers, babies and families. That's why we were supportive of the passage of **Senate Bill 193** and **Senate Bill 194**, critical policies that will help improve birth equity and reduce the health disparities that women and infants of color in Colorado face.

We encouraged a strong start for our youngest Coloradans



A child's first experiences and relationships set the foundation for their development, learning and success, in school and in life. In 2021, we supported early childhood partners on successful efforts to expand the supply of licensed, safe and affordable child care options in the state with **House Bill 1222**, and to form a new department of early childhood, focused on aligning early childhood programs in the state and implementing an effective universal preschool program via **House Bill 1304**. We also supported the passage of

Senate Bill 9 and **Senate Bill 25**, both of which will expand access to family planning services in Colorado, including for undocumented people. We supported additional funding for early childhood mental health consultants in **Senate Bill 137**. And finally, we were happy to see the legislature advance **Senate Bill 27**, which addresses the pandemic-induced increased demand for diapering essentials by creating a program to distribute diapers and other essential baby products to low-income Colorado families.

We strengthened the healthcare workforce



This year, we supported legislation to strengthen Colorado's public health and healthcare workforce. **House Bill 1005** creates the Health Care Services Reserve Corps Task Force in the State public health department to evaluate and make recommendations on the creation of a program to cross-train medical professionals to serve during emergencies and disasters. **House Bill 1107** creates

important protections for the personal information of state and local public health workers who have been crucial in Colorado's pandemic response. **Senate Bill 21** enters Colorado into the Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology Interstate Compact to allow audiologists and speech-language pathologists to practice more seamlessly across multiple states, expanding patient access to services that are crucial for learning and development.

We stopped attempts to weaken access to immunizations



Now more than ever, our children, families and all Coloradans need protection from harmful and deadly infectious diseases, including COVID-19. That's why we joined forces with pro-vaccine advocates around the state to defeat **House Bill-1191** in its first committee.

This anti-vaccine legislation sought to weaken access to immunizations, by prohibiting future requirements for COVID-19 vaccination, including in healthcare settings, at a time when the course of this pandemic remains uncertain.

We supported safe back-to-school efforts



The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the ability of students to learn in-person this year, which impacts not just academic learning, but also social and emotional skills, physical activity, healthy meals, and access to a safe place with trusted, caring adults. That's why we partnered with the American Academy of Pediatrics, Colorado Chapter, and an array of allies in the education community to draft

and distribute a coalition letter that focused on the importance of supporting safe, in-person learning. We also worked together to advocate for federal funds to support schools as they navigate the public health emergency, and we'll continue this unique partnership over the summer to develop innovative ways to address kids' behavioral health needs in school settings.

In addition to our advocacy at the state level, we also served as a voice for kids in Washington, D.C. on the following federal priorities:

- **We pressed Congress for provider COVID-19 relief funding:** Children's hospitals have struggled more than adult hospitals under the weight of responding to COVID-19 and losses due to drops in volumes. Throughout the pandemic, we have continued our advocacy with 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 financial damage of the pandemic on the operations of children's hospitals.
- **We defended and expanded Medicaid and CHIP:** We worked with Colorado's congressional delegation and other federal leaders to increase the federal Medicaid match rate to reduce budget pressure on our state's healthcare safety net, freeing up money to reinvest in behavioral health and preventing cuts to coverage, benefits or providers. We also supported efforts to ensure that Medicaid coverage for children will remain stable until the public health emergency concludes.
- **We enhanced behavioral health efforts:** We worked with a coalition of children's hospitals around the country to develop a strategy at the federal level for enhancing children's behavioral healthcare. We worked with our federal delegation to include \$80 million in pediatric mental health services in the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), which was signed into law in early 2021.
- **We advocated for the Accelerating Kids' Access to Care Act:** Children with serious healthcare needs, and their families, travel long distances to receive the care they need. To make sure we are doing everything we can to expedite their access to care, we remain committed to seeing the Accelerating Kids' Access to Care Act cross the finish line this year. This bipartisan federal legislation was recently re-introduced in Congress (S. 1544 and H.R. 3089) and 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.
- **We advanced critical childhood research:** 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. 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.

To sign up to be a member of the **Child Health Champions network** or learn more about **Children's Colorado's policy and advocacy efforts:**



childrenscolorado.org/Advocacy



ChildHealthChampions



advocacy@childrenscolorado.org



@COChildChamps