

Lifting Children Up in 2020

Children's Hospital Colorado's Policy and Advocacy Priorities Recap



Children's Hospital
Colorado

The situation in our state and across our country has changed drastically as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Colorado's state legislative session paused in March. Lawmakers then returned to the State Capitol in May for a shortened period of time, officially wrapping up on June 15, with a limited scope of activities, prioritizing budget and key policy decisions. Colorado lawmakers had to close a nearly \$3.3 billion budget gap, meaning there were massive cuts across all sectors. While Children's Hospital Colorado's priorities shifted during the 2020 legislative session in response to the public health emergency, we were still able to advance a number of policy and advocacy goals that have the potential to lift the trajectory of a child's life.

Throughout the 2020 Colorado state legislative session, the Children's Colorado Government Affairs team:



Coordinated testimony from 20 experts from Children's Colorado on pending legislation at committee hearings



Actively tracked 156 state bills



Empowered 1,465 constituents to send 1,880 emails to state lawmakers

We protected and expanded coverage and access for all children

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in economic hardship and job loss for many families. Because so many Coloradans rely on their employers for health insurance, families who lose their jobs often also lose health insurance coverage at the same time and may need to rely on Medicaid or the state's Exchange for coverage. We worked in partnership with lawmakers to avoid the most drastic budget cuts that were proposed to Colorado Medicaid during this time when its protections are needed most. We also advocated for **Senate Bill 215** to support the state's reinsurance program and facilitate more affordable and accessible private health insurance coverage for all Colorado children and families. We successfully fought to pass **Senate Bill 212** to preserve the recent expansions in telehealth that otherwise would expire with the current public health emergency. We also worked with a broad coalition to pass **House Bill 1236** which will make it easier for families to voluntarily get connected with health insurance coverage by simply checking a box when they file a tax return.

We fought for community immunity through stronger vaccine policies

During the early days of the Stay at Home order, Colorado's childhood vaccination rates plummeted as low as 40% as the COVID-19 pandemic limited families' contact with primary care providers. While rates have somewhat rebounded since then, these reductions continue to compound Colorado's already worst-in-the-nation childhood vaccination rates. That's why we fought tirelessly for the passage of **Senate Bill 163**, which will boost community immunity while preserving the right of parents to opt their kids out of vaccines. **Senate Bill 163** won the legislature's approval, and the measure was signed into law by Governor Polis, which kicks off efforts to ensure implementation of the new law protects the health and safety of communities across our state.

We confronted tobacco and nicotine addiction among youth

For years, scientific research has shown that smoking damages the body's immune system and puts lung health in jeopardy. Now the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the lungs is one more reason the state legislature successfully advanced **House Bill 1001**, which will update state law to require individuals to be age 21 or older to purchase tobacco and nicotine products, including vaping products. It also requires all tobacco retailers to be licensed in the state, which will help ensure compliance with the law and reduce easy youth access to tobacco and nicotine products. Additionally, lawmakers referred a tobacco tax measure, **House Bill 1427**, so that Colorado voters can consider raising tobacco tax rates and closing a tax loophole on vaping products. Colorado currently ranks 39th in the country for our state tobacco taxes. If passed by voters this November during the election, revenue collected will support enhanced school and pre-K funding, affordable housing, and tobacco cessation and education programs.

We improved behavioral healthcare access across the spectrum of needs

A critical aspect of COVID-19 recovery plans will continue to be responding to the significant increase in children and families' behavioral health needs during this difficult and uncertain time, so we were pleased to see state lawmakers prioritize important legislation to address current and emergent needs. As a result of federal funding the state received for COVID-19 response, **House Bill 1411** will appropriate \$15.2 million for behavioral health programs, including suicide prevention and school-based health centers. **House Bill 1006**, which strengthens access to mental health training and support for early childhood teachers, was folded into a broader early childhood workforce bill and ultimately passed. Additionally, we strongly advocated for a budget request to support a Medicaid waiver program, the Children's Habilitation Residential Program (CHRP), that enables care for children with co-occurring intellectual and developmental disabilities and a mental health condition. Even in the midst of a difficult budget, this rate increase was adopted and we hope this will help close existing gaps in access to residential treatment and facilitate options for care across the continuum of services.

Coming Together as an Organization to Respond to COVID-19



In response to the public health emergency, Children's Hospital Colorado quickly activated to support the state's broader community response effort.

A few examples include:

- We invested in resources to be the first hospital in Colorado to supplement state lab capacity by processing COVID-19 tests in our in-house laboratory.
- We were the second hospital in the nation to facilitate an experimental COVID-19 treatment using blood plasma from recovered patients of all ages.
- We made monumental investments in telehealth to maintain kids' access to care while complying with social distancing, going from 100 telehealth visits per week to 1,000 per day.
- We shared ventilators and other critical supplies with other hospitals to manage statewide needs.
- We launched mobile food distribution, giving over 140,000 pounds of healthy and nutritious food to support families in need.



Our Government Affairs team has continued to work with elected officials and community leaders to help children and families weather the current public health emergency related to COVID-19.

As a result, we've:

- Engaged our Child Health Champions network to send **940 emails** to Colorado's federal congressional delegation, urging them to pass emergency COVID-19 relief to ensure healthcare providers have the resources needed to keep communities safe as we navigate the public health crisis, including investments for telehealth, testing, personal protective equipment, supplies and more.
- Successfully advocated for members of the Colorado congressional delegation to sign onto **7 letters** that encouraged Congress to stand up for frontline caregivers and children's hospitals across the country that have rapidly shifted their capacity to respond to the immense public health needs.
- Worked with teams across the organization to be one of the first in the nation to secure the **Federal Communications Commission COVID-19 Telehealth Program grant**. This funding will help us further expand our telehealth capacity to ensure continued access to pediatric specialty care for Children's Colorado patients across the state and region.
- Worked with federal lawmakers to advocate for solutions that support the **behavioral health and primary care needs** of kids and families in this phase of the pandemic and beyond. We also asked Congress to consider additional financial assistance to states and local governments to maintain basic government functions that protect our communities in the face of severe state budget cuts.

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