Lifting Children Up

2020 Policy and Advocacy Priorities

Children’s Hospital Colorado
Here, it’s different.
Healthier Kids Through Public Policy

Here at Children’s Hospital Colorado, we have a responsibility to advocate. Advocacy is an integral part of caring for children and a core part of our mission. We know that the public policy decisions made by lawmakers in our communities, states and federal government can dramatically shape the health of children, for better or for worse.

That’s why 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 wellbeing of all children.

As a nonpartisan organization, we aim to serve as a resource for families and elected officials alike on the unique needs of children. Above all, we honor our duty to speak up clearly and powerfully for kids in public policy debates.
2020 POLICY AND ADVOCACY PRIORITIES

What to Expect in 2020

During the 2019 Colorado legislative session, we advanced a number of policy and advocacy goals that have the potential to lift the trajectory of children’s lives. We filled gaps in our behavioral health system for Colorado’s kids, protected and expanded healthcare coverage and access for children, took on the teen vaping epidemic, promoted healthy eating and active living, grew the ranks of advocates who speak up for kids, and worked on many other health policy initiatives.

As we look ahead to 2020, a number of factors could influence public policy outcomes. Election years are times of transition that require increased advocacy and vigilance on behalf of kids and families. There will be competing priorities at the state legislature, so we’ll have to break through the noise to keep kids top of mind for lawmakers. The state and national economic picture may dim, meaning less revenue for key priorities. It’s also likely we’ll see new elected officials take office at the state and federal levels after the 2020 elections; educating candidates during the campaign and working with them during the transition will be important for shaping future child health policy for years to come.

This document outlines the priorities that Children’s Hospital Colorado will focus on in 2020 at the local, state and federal level. Through legislative and regulatory policy, and across all of our advocacy work, we will:

• Fight for community immunity through stronger vaccine policies
• Confront tobacco and nicotine addiction among youth
• Protect and expand coverage and access for all children
• Improve behavioral health access across the spectrum of needs
• Accelerate child health outcomes through research

These priorities were selected using a combination of the following criteria:

1. The policy or advocacy activity falls within a priority area determined by the hospital’s Community Health Needs Assessment—early childhood, behavioral health, healthy eating and active living, respiratory health, injury prevention—or the activity is related to our “evergreen” priorities of coverage and access, workforce development or clinical operations.

2. The policy or advocacy activity will make a meaningful difference for kids’ health.

3. Children’s Colorado has an opportunity to proactively pursue the activity by serving as either the lead organization or a key member of the coalition, with a reasonable chance of success.

4. It’s a conversation that would benefit from Children’s Colorado’s unique voice as both an advocate and a healthcare provider for children.

We can only achieve these priorities with the ongoing support of and partnership with our team members and healthcare providers, grassroots advocacy network Child Health Champions, patients and families, and community partners. Together, we can give a voice to Colorado’s kids and families, lifting them up to achieve their greatest potential.
Fighting for Community Immunity Through Stronger Vaccine Policies

All children have the right to be healthy and safe in school and child care settings. However, thousands of kids in our state are inadequately protected against vaccine-preventable diseases. In fact, Colorado kindergartners rank last in the country for measles and chickenpox vaccination rates. In the midst of a national outbreak of measles, which can cause pneumonia, encephalitis and even death, we must act quickly to strengthen vaccine coverage statewide.

We all share a responsibility to protect members of our community who are at higher risk for contracting these diseases. These populations include newborn babies who are too young to receive certain vaccines, seniors and people with weakened immune systems due to cancer, autoimmune disorders and other health conditions.

Additionally, vaccine-preventable diseases are expensive for Colorado parents and caregivers, taxpayers and the healthcare system. In 2017 alone, over 9,000 Colorado children were treated for vaccine-preventable illness through hospitalization or emergency department visits, and three children died. Hospital and emergency department charges to treat vaccine-preventable disease in Colorado kids exceeded $55 million. When adding in office visits, medication, lost wages and decreased productivity, total costs are much higher.

Colorado performs strongly on a host of child health indicators, but we are an outlier when it comes to vaccination policy. Currently, Colorado has one of the easiest immunization exemption processes in the country. Opting school-age children out of receiving vaccines is as simple as signing the back of a napkin, whereas a responsible policy would require equal effort for those who get their child immunized and those who do not.

That’s why Children’s Hospital Colorado is participating in a coalition of child health advocates to pass necessary and common-sense immunization reforms in 2020 that will strengthen Colorado’s school-entry vaccine policies. We’ll work with concerned parents, child health advocacy organizations, public health officials, medical experts and our champions in the legislature to leverage proven, successful policy strategies. We’ll keep advocating until children in Colorado will be able to attend school and child care in a healthy and safe environment, free from the unnecessary risks posed by preventable diseases.
Confronting Tobacco and Nicotine Addiction Among Youth

Colorado is often applauded for being one of the healthiest states in the country, yet we are grappling with an epidemic that threatens a generation of young people. Colorado has the highest rate of teen electronic cigarette use, also known as e-cigarettes or vaping, in the country. One in four young people report current use, which is double the national average, and nearly one in 10 teens still uses traditional cigarettes. In 2020, Children’s Hospital Colorado will pursue a multidimensional approach to curb the accelerating crisis of youth tobacco and nicotine addiction. We will advocate to align Colorado law with federal changes to immediately raise the age of tobacco sales to 21 in our state, as well as establish a strong retailer enforcement mechanism. We will also work to ban the flavors in these products that hook children, raise the state’s tobacco tax and close the tax loophole on liquid nicotine.

Enhancing federal efforts to raise the age of sale for tobacco products

Teen vaping is associated with a greater likelihood of smoking traditional cigarettes over time. Research has also shown that restricting tobacco sales to people above age 21 is linked to lower smoking rates among 18- to 20-year-olds. In partnership with tobacco control advocates, we will align Colorado law with recent federal changes to raise the minimum legal sales age from 18 to 21 for all tobacco products, including e-cigarettes. In conjunction with this policy, we will pursue a statewide tobacco retail licensure requirement to establish a robust enforcement structure that will help ensure retailers are following the law and not selling products to underage youth.

Advancing a flavor ban

E-cigarette manufacturers use flavors like mint, mango, gummy bear and cotton candy to attract teens; 80 percent of youth report starting to vape by using a flavored product. In 2009, the federal government passed legislation banning all flavors except menthol in traditional cigarettes. If the state wants to get serious and take bold steps to reduce youth initiation of these products, lawmakers should support a flavor ban policy on all e-cigarette products. Furthermore, a prohibition on menthol flavored cigarettes will go a long way to addressing the disproportionate use of flavored cigarettes among racial and ethnic minority smokers, LGBT smokers and teens.

Closing the tax loophole on liquid nicotine

Pricing policies are the single most powerful way to stop youth use and also help reduce tobacco-related healthcare costs. Last year, the legislature tried but failed to refer a ballot measure to voters that would have raised our state’s appallingly low tobacco tax rate (about 40th in the country) and closed a loophole that exempts the liquid nicotine in e-cigarettes from the state’s tobacco tax. In 2020, we will work with key leaders and advocates on a renewed push to raise the state’s tobacco tax and ensure a commensurate tax on the liquid nicotine used in e-cigarettes.
Protecting and Expanding Coverage and Access for All Children

Children’s Hospital Colorado is a leader in defending the Medicaid program and championing children’s access to insurance and care. These principles will continue to guide us in 2020 as we engage with issues of public and private insurance coverage. Improving healthcare affordability and reducing the total cost of care will be major objectives for legislators in 2020, and we will work collaboratively with policymakers and patient advocacy organizations to support meaningful reforms.

Covering all kids
Recent years have seen troubling erosion in the gains made in covering children in Colorado. Last year saw the uninsured rate tick up among children while our state’s Medicaid enrollment continued on a downward trajectory. Though there are many causes for this concerning loss in coverage, the problem must be addressed quickly and aggressively. We will collaborate with patient advocates, Colorado’s Medicaid agency and legislators to reverse the trend.

Supporting real affordability
One of the many barriers to achieving greater health coverage is the high cost of insurance in many parts of the state. In 2020, we expect to see follow-up legislation from 2019’s State Public Option study. The proposal relies on private insurance companies and cuts hospital reimbursement considerably, while making a disappointingly small improvement in the uninsured rate. Though there are both positive and negative aspects of the proposal and details are still being refined, we have serious concerns about the sustainability of the model and the potential for destabilizing the insurance market in Colorado. We will advocate for a greater emphasis on expanding insurance coverage, along with real sustainability and shared responsibility within the proposal. Most of all, we’ll serve as a voice for children in the process. Any policy options under consideration should do no harm to children’s health insurance coverage and access to high-quality care.

Championing meaningful transparency
Hospital and provider price transparency have been major areas of focus for both state and federal lawmakers over the last several years as a mechanism for addressing healthcare affordability concerns. Lawmakers continue to explore policy options to address healthcare affordability concerns for consumers, which could have an impact on children’s healthcare services and coverage. We expect to see additional legislative interest in prescription drug pricing transparency and cost containment in 2020. Principally, we believe that comprehensive solutions should look at the “total cost of care” across the state’s entire healthcare system. Without considering health spending broadly (hospitals, insurers, providers and pharmaceutical companies), it will be challenging to effectively address affordability.
Improving Behavioral Healthcare Access Across the Spectrum of Needs

Over the last few years, addressing Colorado’s child and youth behavioral health crisis has become a priority for Children’s Hospital Colorado and many of our partners across the state. As part of this statewide momentum, we have led and participated in coalitions and advocated for policies that establish much-needed supports for standardized behavioral health screening, high-fidelity wraparound care for families with multi-systems-involved youth, and residential care for youth with significant intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and co-occurring behavioral health challenges. In 2020, we will engage our state and community partners to ensure that these new programs are implemented with maximum positive effect on children, youth and families.

Enhancing more equitable care for children with co-occurring conditions

In particular, we will develop and advocate for improvements to legislation that will increase access to the new ten-bed residential child care facility established by the legislature in 2018. This program supports children and youth with co-occurring I/DD and mental health conditions who do not meet criteria for an inpatient hospitalization, but are not yet safe to be in the community. When the program was established, youth in county custody were given priority access to the facility, but those not involved in child welfare were effectively denied access. Without access to the I/DD facility program, children may remain stuck in a costly hospital facility or other out-of-home placement until a placement can be found. By lifting these access barriers, the state can keep families together while providing more equitable and cost-effective care to children and youth with complex I/DD and mental health needs.

Building capacity in early childhood mental health

We will also work to improve access to a crucial prevention program: Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation. We know that the early years are the best time to support a child’s healthy development for life. This valuable program connects early childhood teachers and the families they serve with consultants who specialize in early childhood development and mental health. These consultants provide support and guidance in areas like classroom management, emotional regulation strategies and social emotional development. Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation has been shown to reduce teacher burnout and early childhood suspensions and expulsions, improve young children’s social-emotional skills, and increase the early identification of behavioral health challenges and developmental delays. We will work to provide a robust infrastructure in state law for this program. The proposal will also expand the settings in which the consultants can practice, such as pediatric primary care clinics, public health agencies, county child welfare agencies, and home visitation programs.

By working to increase access to early childhood prevention programs, as well as residential treatment for youth with complex needs, we are committed to strengthening the behavioral healthcare system to help Colorado’s kids and families thrive.
Accelerating Child Health Outcomes Through Research

The majority of most known rare diseases affect children. This often leaves families to care for children with a debilitating chronic illness—many of whom will not live to see their fifth birthday. A robust pediatric physician-scientist workforce is essential to finding cures for and treating millions of children fighting rare diseases nationwide. Yet the number of slots available through National Institutes of Health (NIH) pediatrician-focused research training programs has declined in recent years. This includes a reduction of the Child Health Research Awards from 88 trainees in 2011 to just 36 today and a reduction in Pediatric Scientist Development Award training slots from 17 per institution in 2017 to just 10 per institution today.

Moreover, the field of pediatrics is especially challenged when it comes to mentors for physician-scientists, including mentors who reflect the diversity of today’s early-career pediatric researchers. The 2014 NIH Report on the Physician-Scientist Workforce recommended establishing “a new physician-scientist-specific granting mechanism to facilitate transition from training to independence.” For years, Children’s Colorado has joined with other children’s hospitals to participate in a national Coalition for Pediatric Medical Research.

This year, our coalition will seek to advance the Pediatricians Accelerate Childhood Therapies (PACT) Act. This federal legislation aims to address 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 with diverse backgrounds who have been traditionally underrepresented in the field.

In concert with our children’s hospital partners across the country, we will work diligently in 2020 to get the PACT Act over the finish line in the U.S. House and Senate and signed into law. Success will mean that children can benefit from the life-saving and breakthrough treatments developed by the nation’s next generation of top pediatric physician-scientists.
2020 POLICY AND ADVOCACY PRIORITIES

Additional 2020 Policy and Advocacy Initiatives

While the topics listed above constitute our top child health priorities, we plan to actively work on a number of additional child health and healthcare policies in the year ahead.

Here’s a preview of some of the other priorities we anticipate:

Securing equal access to breakthrough drugs and therapies

This is an incredibly exciting time in medicine. Many innovative drugs, gene therapies and immunotherapies have been introduced in the last three years that are now the best clinical options for certain conditions ranging from rare neurological disorders to cancers. Before the introduction of these breakthrough drugs and therapies, many of these conditions had few, if any, effective treatments.

While these new drugs and therapies with lifesaving potential are available to healthcare providers and can offer the chance to drastically improve health outcomes, the costs of these treatments are unprecedented. These drugs may cost tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even more than a million dollars for a single dose. One gene therapy released in 2019 for the treatment of spinal muscular atrophy costs more than $2.1 million dollars.

In 2020, Children’s Colorado will continue to press Colorado Medicaid for sustainable coverage of these new treatments. We will also work with lawmakers to advocate for long-term fixes to address drug costs and ensure coverage. Throughout, we will be a leading voice in urging our state and federal governments, as well as the whole healthcare system, to grapple with the costs of these drugs and ensure equitable access for all children, no matter where they live or what kind of insurance their family has, because their future depends on it.

Ensuring a strong start for little ones

A child’s first experiences and relationships set the foundation for development and learning that leads to success in school and later in life. That’s why in 2020, we will work with early childhood partners to expand home visiting programs in the state to meet caregivers where they are and provide services that build their knowledge and capacity to support a child’s healthy development during and following pregnancy.

We’re also hopeful that we’ll reach an agreement this year to update state policy regarding child abuse and neglect when newborn babies test positive for controlled substances. By modernizing current language to reflect the addition of alcohol, as well as changes to marijuana legalization in the state, we’re optimistic that Colorado will better harmonize state and federal law while also keeping families together when it’s in the best interest of the child’s health and safety.
Growing the ranks of child health advocates

Influencing public policy takes the efforts of dedicated, passionate individuals and organizations coming together to speak up on behalf of kids and families. In 2020, we’ll continue to strengthen and grow our grassroots advocacy network, Child Health Champions, which harnesses the power of almost 11,000 members. We work with these advocates to send emails, make phone calls, write postcards, tweet at legislators and testify at the State Capitol to tell stories of how real kids in their communities experience public policy.

We’ll also host our ninth annual Speak Up for Kids Day at the Capitol, in partnership with the Colorado Children’s Campaign and Clayton Early Learning Center, where we’ll train over 180 child health and early childhood advocates to be a voice for kids with their state legislators. And finally, we’ll continue engaging healthcare providers, pediatric residents, pediatricians across the state with our Pediatric Advocacy Action Team, and Children’s Colorado team members to advocate for kids health in their communities and at the state Capitol.
Promoting healthy eating

When children and their families have access to proper nutrition, their potential to thrive across the lifespan increases. That’s why we are committed to making sure healthy food is within reach for all Coloradans. To this end, we will lead one local policy initiative, in addition to supporting our anti-hunger partners on three state-level food security priorities in the 2020 legislative session:

Making the healthy choice the easy choice for Aurora families

Sugary drinks are the single leading source of added sugars in the American diet and nearly 50 percent of two- to five-year-olds consume at least one sugary drink daily. Medical evidence suggests children who drink at least one sugary beverage per day are 55 percent more likely to be overweight or obese, and children experiencing obesity are at increased risk for health conditions including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, cancer, asthma and depression. That’s why we are co-leading a local policy to make the healthy choice the easy one when it comes to beverages on kids’ menus at Aurora restaurants. In partnership with Tri-County Health Department and the American Heart Association, we’ll ensure that water, unflavored milk and other healthy alternatives are the default drink served to kids, though parents can order a sugary drink for their child if they choose.

Nourishing student success

Nutrition supports student success from early childhood through higher education, and is a crucial factor in neurodevelopment, physical health, mental health and academic achievement. Unfortunately, too many students in Colorado lack consistent access to nutritious food. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) plays a vital role in providing needed food resources, but due to program barriers, many families with children and many young adults do not apply even when eligible. With adequate resources, government agencies, nonprofits, school districts and colleges can provide application assistance to support students in accessing the SNAP benefits that bolster student success. This year, as an initiative of the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger, we will request additional state general funds—to be matched by private and federal funds—for a total investment of $1 million for SNAP enrollment support for students, which will generate up to $12 million in SNAP benefits.

Incentivizing healthy food access

We will also partner to increase the Colorado Healthy Food Incentive Fund. A funding boost will ensure sustainability for two key programs run by LiveWell Colorado: 1) Double Up Food Bucks, which offers a dollar-for-dollar match for recipients of food stamps to purchase fresh, Colorado-grown fruits and vegetables and 2) the Produce Box program, where community-supported agriculture shares are bought and distributed to participants in the Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the Older Adult Congregate Meal Program.

Increasing quality Colorado-grown produce in food pantries

In 2018, the state legislature allocated $500,000 for the Colorado Food Pantry Assistance Grant to provide funds for food pantries and food banks to purchase high-quality produce, meat and dairy from Colorado Proud farmers and ranchers. The first year of the program was a great success, with grants to 95 food pantries and food banks increasing access to nutritious food for many community members, while providing a critical revenue source for local producers. The allocated funding, however, only addressed a fraction of the need as applications for funding totaled over $2 million. In the coming session, we will partner with Hunger Free Colorado and others to request $1 million in annual funding for the Food Pantry Assistance Grant to improve the available resources to support community members with lower incomes statewide, while also supporting local farmers and ranchers and helping build strong local food systems.
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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