

Lifting Children Up

2023 State Policy and Advocacy Priorities Recap



Throughout the 2023 Colorado state legislative session, Children's Hospital Colorado advocated for policies to elevate the resilient voices of kids, families and communities, amplifying our advocacy mission and advancing policy solutions that will strengthen the future of children's health. Collaborating with our team members, community partners and lawmakers, we increased support for mental health services where kids need it most, expanded the workforce to support the social needs of children and families, and defended access to care. Even amid a difficult legislative session with a proposal that could have led to devastating impacts to the pediatric healthcare system in Colorado, we spoke up loudly and clearly for the needs of kids through it all and secured many victories for child health.

During the 2023 Colorado state legislative session, we:



Actively tracked **176** state bills



Collaborated on over **34** amendments on **14** bills



Coordinated testimony from **28** experts at committee hearings



Submitted **10** letters to legislative committees on pending legislation



Empowered constituents to send **2,520** emails to state lawmakers



Trained and activated **115** advocates at Youth Mental Health Action Day



Gathered **80** organizations and individuals on policy coordination through the Children, Youth and Families Mental Health Coalition



Expanding Support for Mental Health Services Where Kids Need it Most

In collaboration with counties, state agencies, community treatment providers and statewide advocacy organizations, Children's Colorado advocated to increase access to services and strengthen accountability for children and youth who end up boarding in our emergency departments or having extended stays in the hospital due to complex mental health needs and lack of safe discharge options. **House Bill 1269** provides funding for two additional years to maintain existing residential treatment capacity for children and youth with complex mental health needs and to help create a funding pool to incentivize additional community treatment providers to serve children and youth who face barriers to hospital discharge. The bill also requires the state to analyze whether setting minimum rate requirements in Medicaid can support stronger access to critical mental health services such as residential treatment and intensive home-based therapy. Finally, the bill requires counties and hospitals to report quarterly on the number of children who are boarding or have extended stays to provide transparency, accountability and to inform future policy efforts.

Additionally, we support **Senate Bill 174** to increase access to mental health services for children under age 21 who are insured by Medicaid without the requirement for a mental health diagnosis. This expands access to integrated care and provides care to children and youth in need who may otherwise have barriers to access.

Preventing and Addressing Disordered Eating

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Children's Colorado witnessed an increase in the number of patients with eating disorders, and two proposals this year were aimed at addressing current challenges for young people. **Senate Bill 14** establishes a disordered eating prevention program within the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment to maintain resources for the public regarding risk and prevention factors of disordered eating, including opportunities to support teachers, school staff, students and parents on prevention and treatment for children and youth. **Senate Bill 176** increases access to treatment for individuals with disordered eating by prohibiting health plans and Medicaid from utilizing body mass index to determine access to treatment. The bill also prohibits retail establishments from selling over-the-counter diet pills to individuals under age 18.



Defending Kids' Healthcare Coverage and Access

Protecting Outpatient Services

State lawmakers considered a proposal this year, **House Bill 1215**, related to outpatient services provided by hospitals that was deeply concerning and could have impacted pediatric access to care across Colorado and the region. The introduced version would have prohibited hospitals from billing “facility fees” in outpatient settings. Facility fees pay for the care provided by nurses, social workers, interpreters, environmental services team members and more. Thankfully, a coordinated and unified healthcare advocacy community spoke up loudly and clearly about the devastating risk that the bill presented for access to care. Lawmakers removed the most severe impacts of the bill and narrowed the scope to a study of facility fees, consumer transparency requirements, and a provision prohibiting charging patients facility fees for certain preventive services.

Stabilizing Health Insurance Coverage for Kids and Families

We also worked to ensure kids' coverage remains stable as the federally declared public health emergency ended in May 2023. Colorado has long been a national leader in maintaining health insurance coverage for kids throughout the pandemic, but with the continuous coverage protections of the public health emergency expiring, hundreds of thousands of children covered by Colorado Medicaid are at-risk of losing coverage and becoming uninsured. To address this challenge, we worked closely with other child

health advocates on **House Bill 1300** to require Medicaid to seek federal authorization to extend continuous eligibility for children from birth to age three. The bill also sets up a study of how the Medicaid program can better address health-related social needs. Additionally, we worked with lawmakers to provide funding for counties to process appeals in cases when families lose their Medicaid eligibility due to an error. Taken together, these changes will help more kids stay insured and therefore able to keep their medical appointments, especially in their early years when frequent screenings, vaccinations and check-ups are critical to their development and school readiness.

Enhancing Access to Life-saving Vaccines

Immunizations are a safe, effective way to protect children from disease, hospitalization, disability and death. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many children fell behind on their routine immunizations, increasing the risks for outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases. We were proud to support the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment budget request passed by the legislature to invest in a mobile vaccine clinic program to reach disproportionately affected communities. Additionally, Children's Colorado supported **Senate Bill 260** to formalize permanent changes that ensure equitable access to publicly-funded vaccines.



Advancing Solutions to Address Health Equity

Addressing Health Disparities and Contributing to Lower Healthcare Costs

Community health workers improve patient health outcomes, address health disparities and reduce healthcare costs while also expanding and diversifying the healthcare workforce. Children's Colorado worked with a coalition of dozens of organizations across the state to pass **Senate Bill 002** that will enable community health workers to be paid for their care by Colorado Medicaid. Community health workers typically deliver health education, including preventive services and chronic disease management, while supporting patients in navigating the healthcare system and accessing community-based services to address social determinants of health.

Housing is Healthcare and Food is Medicine

Access to stable, affordable and safe housing has an impact on kids' and families' ability to live a healthy life, and we were proud to support several housing policies.

During the pandemic, courts used virtual courtrooms for eviction proceedings and **House Bill 1186** will allow courts to continue to enable remote participation in eviction proceedings. This flexibility helps ensure equitable access for families who may have barriers for participation in eviction cases such as childcare and transportation.

In the fall of 2022, we supported Proposition 123 to create a \$300 million affordable housing fund that will support affordable housing development, financing for multifamily housing options and resources for people experiencing homelessness. Following voter approval, the legislature advanced **House Bill 1304**, to ensure housing affordability programs can be implemented effectively across the state.

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We also supported **Senate Bill 213** as a critical and necessary step to reform land use policy in the state and respond to the lack of affordable housing in Colorado. Both the patients and families that we serve, as well as our healthcare workforce, often cannot afford to live near where they work. Despite a broad coalition, the

bill did not pass through the legislative process. We anticipate there will be continued policy conversations into the next legislative session, building momentum to create a more coordinated plan for the state and local governments to advance more affordable housing solutions.



Keeping Kids Safe

Research has found that from 2018 to 2021, fatal and non-fatal firearm injuries increased in Colorado children ages zero to 19, averaging almost one injury every day. Sadly, the firearm mortality rate among Colorado children averages more than one death per week. In Colorado, the common denominator to injury and death in children— accidents, suicide, homicide— is access to firearms. **Senate Bill 169** prioritizes gun violence prevention by raising the age of purchase of long guns

such as rifles and shotguns from 18 to 21. Laws that set minimum age requirements for the purchase of firearms are intended to decrease the number of suicides, homicides and unintentional shootings among young people. Our support for the legislation this year builds on our previous advocacy to establish an important safe storage violence prevention bill from 2021 and bipartisan federal firearm safety legislation from 2022.



Investing in a Strong Start for Kids

Along with nearly 68% of Colorado voters, Children's Colorado proudly supported Proposition EE in 2020 to champion youth tobacco and vaping prevention and fund early childhood programs. This legislative session, we supported the passage of **House Bill 1290** to provide voters with the opportunity to allow the state to retain the excess revenue generated by the increased tobacco and vaping tax and use it to fund universal preschool, instead of giving money back to tobacco wholesalers and sellers.

Be a Child Health Champion



Scan the QR code to join our Child Health Champions advocacy network to quickly and easily advocate for kids' health.



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