

Valuing Our Voices on Health

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31
Wednesday, 08 May 2019 08:08

<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/school-meeting-crowd-s5.jpg>



Sen. Smith writes about key initiatives in Gov. Evers' budget to make our communities healthier, including Medicaid expansion, lead testing and abatement programs, and investments to the Women's Health Block Grant.

EAU CLAIRE, WI - During the past two months, I traveled throughout the 31st Senate District and met with constituents to hear their thoughts on the budget introduced by Governor Tony Evers. I joined Governor Evers at listening sessions in Eau Claire, Oshkosh, Kenosha, Superior and sat alongside Joint Finance Committee (JFC) members in River Falls for a public hearing. These were opportunities to listen to the comments and reactions from hundreds of Wisconsinites.

We're now on to the next step of the budget process. Despite what the Republican JFC members heard from men and women at hearings in Janesville, Oak Creek, River Falls and Green Bay, they've decided to start from scratch, disregarding the vast support for "The People's Budget." They refused to consider the long-term impacts these political actions have on Wisconsin's children and women. It's time we pay attention and speak up louder – we must make sure the needs and voices of all Wisconsinites are valued.

While meeting with constituents in the 31st Senate District and joining Governor Evers at the budget listening sessions, one thing was clear: Wisconsinites support Medicaid expansion. They back Governor Evers' proposal to accept federal funds to expand healthcare access for 82,000 people in our state. Folks understand the value of Medicaid expansion, which would save our state \$324.5 million.

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By leveraging state funds, we would see an additional \$1.6 billion in new federal funding to invest in local programs and services that address Wisconsin's most concerning health needs. From that investment, there would be \$106 million going directly towards the counties that I represent, including Buffalo, Pepin, Trempealeau, Pierce, Eau Claire, Chippewa and Jackson. A significant portion of these funds would be used to improve health outcomes for women and their newborns by extending postpartum coverage for a whole year, rather than the current 60 days.

We must make sure that Wisconsin's children continue to grow up in a healthy community. That's why I strongly support Governor Evers' proposal to invest \$52 million in programs to improve lead testing and abatement. It's shocking to know that children in Wisconsin have elevated lead levels in their bloodstream that are higher than the national average. In fact, Buffalo County has higher rates of lead poisoning than in Flint, Michigan, according to the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families.



I was encouraged to see that the Governor included \$2 million in the budget towards preventing childhood lead poisoning in the counties that I represent. It's vitally important for the JFC to add this to the budget. These investments are necessary to ensure our children have access to clean drinking water, which will contribute to their intellectual and developmental growth.

The "People's Budget" commits to strengthening women's healthcare by restoring Women's Health Block Grant Funding. These grants are directed to local public health departments and health clinics to provide essential services, including pregnancy testing, cervical cancer screenings, perinatal care, STI testing and treatment and general health screenings.

The restoration in grant funding is incredibly important to make sure access remains available for women that need it. Under the previous administration, the block grant funding was cut by

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10%, according to the Wisconsin Alliance for Women's Health. This resulted in five Planned Parenthood clinics, including one in Chippewa Falls, to close their doors on approximately 3,000 women. These clinics did not provide any abortion services, rather they were open to provide critical primary care. These closures were politically motivated. Investing in women's health initiatives isn't about politics, it's just plain common sense.

Republicans shouldn't play politics when it comes to the health and well-being of Wisconsin women and children by not expanding Medicaid. Although the listening sessions are over, it's not too late to raise your voice to advocate for these programs in the "People's Budget." The Joint Finance Committee will begin voting on the budget on Thursday, May 9th. Soon they will be making their decision to include Medicaid expansion and determining the fate of programs to support women and children.

Call the JFC co-chairs, Senator Alberta Darling at [\(608\) 266-5830](tel:(608)266-5830) and Representative John Nygren at [\(608\) 266-2343](tel:(608)266-2343)
or a JFC member from the list that can be found here:
<https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2019/committees/joint/1968>

Let them know you support these health care investments. Encourage your friends and family to get involved. This is an important time – let's make sure all of Wisconsin's voices are valued.