

April 28, 2021

Honorable Members of the Joint Committee on Finance,

On behalf of the Milwaukee Early Care and Education Civic Response Team, we're writing to ask that you invest \$106 million in new state funds into the Child Care Strong program in the 2021-23 state budget.

High-quality child care is a powerful two-generation economic development strategy. It allows the parents of young children to participate in the workforce and is one of the highest-impact investments we can make in children's long-term academic, social, and developmental success.¹ Yet families in Milwaukee and across the state struggle to access quality, affordable child care. Over half of Milwaukee's Black and Brown children live in communities where there is not enough access to child care. And where child care does exist, it is often prohibitively expensive. The average Milwaukee family has to pay more than 20 percent of its annual household income to afford care for one infant.² The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically exacerbated these gaps in access to quality, affordable child care.³

When working parents don't have access to child care, or when the cost of child care is out of reach, they are forced to make hard choices like working fewer hours, changing jobs, or dropping out of the workforce altogether. For example, according to a recent UW-Extension survey of Wisconsin parents, 42 percent of women reported that they had cut back on hours or quit a job because of child care costs.⁴ And when children don't have access to quality early care and education, they are denied one of the most effective tools for academic achievement and social mobility.

Our team is comprised of diverse leaders from across Milwaukee's early childhood community and is working together to identify and collectively respond to pressing needs in the sector. We've secured local and national philanthropic dollars to help stabilize child care providers in Black and Brown communities through COVID disruptions. We've supported early educators with training and resources to meet the profound mental health challenges many young children are experiencing. We've worked with local health officials ensure that child care providers have information and support needed to operate safely throughout the pandemic. And we've worked with state leaders to inform and communicate about the Child Care Counts: COVID-19 Emergency Payment Program, which has been a vital short-term lifeline for the sector.

Wisconsin has been a leader in getting federal COVID-19 relief funding into the child care sector to keep providers open and safely serving kids throughout the pandemic. We applaud this work and are grateful for this state leadership. But these one-time, emergency funds cannot take the place of sustained state investment in

¹ U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, [The Business Case for High-Quality Childcare](#); The Heckman Equation, [Perry Preschool: Intergenerational Effects](#)

² Greater Milwaukee Foundation, [A Seat at the Table: Ensuring Equitable Access to Early Childhood Education in Milwaukee](#)

³ National Association for the Education of Young Children, [Child Care Providers are Sacrificing to Stay Open and Waiting for Relief](#)

⁴ UW-Madison Division of Extension, [Are the Kids Alright? Women, Work, and Childcare](#)

ensuring that all families have access to quality, affordable child care. In other words, federal funds will help the child care sector survive the pandemic. State investment is needed for the sector to thrive.

A \$106 million investment of new state funds in the Child Care Strong program will support all regulated child care providers and include important financial incentives for providers to serve infants and toddlers (the most expensive group of children in care) and low-income children, as well as incentives for high-quality care. And, critically, this program would help address challenges with child care workforce recruitment and retention by requiring that least half of the monthly payments to providers must be allocated toward staff salaries and benefits.

We urge you to support this critical investment.

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to Wisconsin's children and families.

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