

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

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FEDERAL

Congress

May is Mental Health Awareness Month

Children's is committed to focusing on the unique mental and behavioral health needs of children and adolescents and will be working closely with state and federal lawmakers on opportunities to advance access and On April 28, the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee [held a hearing](#), "Examining Our COVID-19 Response: Using Lessons Learned to Address Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders." The expert witness panel featured testimony from Dr. Tami D. Benton, Psychiatrist-in-Chief and Executive Director and Chair of the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Committee members and witnesses discussed the impact the pandemic has had on children and adolescents, highlighting the increase in the number of children experiencing a mental health crisis and growing emergency department and inpatient boarding due to a lack of alternative care options. Dr. Benton emphasized loan forgiveness programs and increasing other workforce supports as critical opportunities to increase access to care. The hearing covered an array of additional issues, including the importance of telehealth expansions in improving access, particularly through audio-only services; integrating mental health services into primary care; partnerships to support access to school-based mental health services; and the need for trauma-informed training to support children and adolescents.

Children's Hospital Association (CHA) submitted a statement for the record highlighting the traumatic impact of the pandemic on children's mental health, including the increase in emergency department boarding of children in crisis in children's hospitals. The statement also outlines recommendations to advance policies and solutions Congress can explore now that will support care along the continuum of need from early intervention and prevention to helping kids in crisis. These recommendations align with the [specific legislative recommendations](#) included in the Strengthening Kids' Mental Health Now proposal. The objective of this proposal is to help all children access mental health services at the time they need them by strengthening our nation's mental health infrastructure for children and youth. Strengthening Kids' Mental Health Now will improve kids' access to services from early childhood through adolescence.

Next week, the Children's Health Care Caucus will have a hearing on Capitol Hill. Rep. Kathy Castor and former Rep. Dave Reichert (R-WA) founded the bipartisan caucus dedicated to building support for ideas that improve the quality of care for children and their access to the quality care. The hearing is scheduled for Wednesday, May 12 at 11am (CST). The focus of the hearing will be mental and behavioral health during a pandemic.

Last week, President Joe Biden addressed the nation and unveiled his American Family Plan aimed at supporting families by expanding access to education and childcare. The proposal is estimated to cost nearly \$1.8 trillion; Biden proposed financing the Plan partly through higher taxes on the wealthiest 1% of Americans.

President Joe Biden's American Family Plan

Education- \$506 billion

- \$200 billion for free pre-school for all three-and-four-year-old children
- \$109 billion for two years of free community college
- \$80 billion in Pell Grants
- \$62 billion focused on degree completion for students and community colleges that serve students from disadvantaged communities
- \$46 billion in Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Minority Serving Institutions
- \$9 billion for teacher training

Childcare- \$225 billion

- Provide free childcare to lowest income families and funding so families earning 1.5 times the state median income pay no more than 7% of their income on childcare

Paid Leave- Estimated \$225 billion

- Establish a paid family and medical leave guaranteeing 12 weeks of paid leave
- Pass the Healthy Families Act which would require employers to offer seven days of paid sick leave per year to employees

Nutrition- \$46 billion

- \$45 billion to expand summer and school food programs for children that are eligible for free-and-reduced meals
- \$1 billion health foods incentive demonstration; allow convicted felons of drug-related offenses access SNAP

Tax Credits

- \$200 billion to make permanent the Affordable Care Act premium tax credits as outlined in the American Rescue Plan
- Extend the Child Tax Credit increases in the American Rescue Plan through 2025 (\$3,000-\$3,600 per child)
- Make permanent the temporary Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit as outlined in the American Rescue Plan (\$4,000 for one child or \$8,000 for two or more)

Proposal to Pay for the American Family Plan

- Require financial institutions to report information on account flows so earnings from investments and business activity are reported like wages
- \$700 billion in increased resources for the IRS for enforcement
- Increase the top individual income tax rate to 39.6%
- Increase the capital gains tax rate for households making more than \$1 million to 39.6 percent
- Eliminate carried interest
- Permanently restrict the use of excess business loans
- Consistently apply the 3.8% Medicare tax on earnings over \$400,000

STATE

Nebraska Legislature

The rumor mill continues to suggest the Legislature is preparing to recess early (late-May) and reconvene in the fall to finish the session focusing on redistricting, a requirement every ten years once Census data becomes available to reconfigure district boundaries in preparation for the 2022 elections. This could limit the number of days to advance key bills- like LB529, which would create a registry of social workers in schools. We are working closer with senators' offices to ensure our priority bills are scheduled early this month.

Great news- Nebraska Governor Ricketts signed the \$9.7 billion biennial budget without any vetoes!

Highlights from the [Governor's press release](#) upon signing:

1. **Medicaid provider rate increases** of 2% in each of the next two years
2. **Controls State Spending:** The budget signed into law by the Governor limits the State's annual budget growth to 1.7 percent.
3. **Property Tax Relief:** The budget delivers about \$1.45 billion in property tax relief over the biennium. This includes \$613 million in direct property tax relief through the State's Property Tax Credit Relief Fund, and over \$627 million from the newly enacted LB1107 refundable property tax credit.
4. **K-12 School Funding:** The budget provides over \$1 billion annually in aid to K-12 public schools.
5. **Public Safety:** The budget kicks off the process of replacing the decaying Nebraska State Penitentiary with a new, modern prison. This investment will also increase the operational capacity of Nebraska's corrections system to meet forecasted needs.

Also last week, the Nebraska Economic Forecasting and Advisory Board met and their new projections on state revenue give the legislature another \$38M to spend on bills being passed with a fiscal impact over the two-year biennium.

Sometime in May the state will be receiving additional guidance on distribution of federal COVID relief funds. We are currently researching details on these dollars and have talked with the Chair of the Appropriations Committee on the legislature's participation in appropriating these very significant dollars. Although they are one-time dollars, this funding

would have significant impact on key areas of the state including health care, economic development, housing, capital construction, children needs, education and local community recovery. There is reason to be encouraged after recent discussions with senators that the legislature will play a key role in this funding distribution through public hearings during the interim and legislation in 2022.

Other Nebraska Legislative Activity-

- [LB108](#) (SNAP benefits) advanced this week to Final Reading.
 - Senator McCollister reduced the original increase of 180% of poverty to 165% of poverty to garner support. On Select File, a negotiated amendment introduced by Senator Arch passed that requires these new SNAP participants (households with income between 131% and 165% of poverty guidelines, shall be referred to the [SNAP Next Step Program](#) if they are eligible for that program and the program is available in that household's geographic area. The program was developed by the Ricketts administration for SNAP beneficiaries to assist in finding employment and is said to be successful since its' implementation. With this amendment, there is an understanding the Governor will sign the legislation.
- [LB583](#) (e-prescribe bill) was given final approval.
 - It provides that, beginning in 2022, prescribers are to issue prescriptions to a pharmacy for controlled substances using electronic prescription technology.

Children's continues to monitor over 300 legislative bills that directly or indirectly impact the overall well-being of the children in Nebraska. For more information on how you can help advocate for the needs of children or to collaborate with Children's, please contact Liz Lyons at llyons@childrensomaha.org or 402-955-4139.

LOCAL

Omaha City Council

As reported in the Omaha World Herald, the Omaha City Council does not plan to renew the city-wide mask mandate which expires on May 25. If the Council had planned to extend the mandate councilmembers would have been required to introduce the measure at the April 20th meeting to allow a continuous mandate. Councilmembers are monitoring COVID-19 cases, vaccination numbers and feedback from the Douglas County Health Department.

Tuesday, May 11 is Omaha's General Election Day!

Polls will be open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Use the "Find Your Voting Information" tool on the [Douglas County Election Commission website](#) to learn where you can cast a ballot in person.

(Sources: CHA, WhiteHouse.gov, NHA, Nebraskalegislature.gov, NCHEA, Peetz & Co.)