

WISCONSIN PUBLIC HEALTH COUNCIL

*Assure safe and healthy people by monitoring progress on the state health plan
and on the readiness for public health emergencies.*



April 4, 2025

Good morning/afternoon Senator Marklein and Representative Born and members of the Joint Finance Committee,

Thank you for being here to hear about critical issues in Wisconsin.

My name is Paula Morgen, and I serve as the Chair of the Wisconsin Public Health Council. I have over 38 years of experience in health and healthcare in our state.

The Public Health Council (PHC) was created in 2003 by the State Legislature. The 23-member [council](https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publichealthcouncil/index.htm) (<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publichealthcouncil/index.htm>) is made up of Governor-appointed representatives from across the state, including people working in public health and healthcare, not for profits, and other sectors.

The Council, per State mandate, advises the Department of Health Services, the Governor, the Legislature and the public on key public health issues. Key roles include monitoring and providing guidance on progress in implementing Wisconsin's Public Health Plan and coordination of responses to public health emergencies. Part of the Council's work includes identifying key issues that impact health outcomes and then advising related to health impacts of State policy and budget decisions.

A strong Public Health system is essential for healthy and economically thriving communities across Wisconsin. People can be more successful in school, in work, and in life if they are able to be as healthy as possible. Just like other infrastructure that we need in our State, such as roads, fire departments, schools and more, our Public Health system at the State and Local level is necessary to prevent disease and support keeping people as healthy as possible.

Public health services promote healthier communities and can reduce overall health care costs through prevention. For every \$1 invested in local public health interventions, more than \$4 is saved¹. For example, a public health worker supporting a family to have a healthy pregnancy and start at life for their child has been shown to increase employment of parents and decrease the likelihood of negative school experiences for the child.² Public health departments making sure that there are places for medications to be dropped off if no longer needed means these medications are not available for someone else to abuse. A local health department testing and following up on a lead-poisoned child means that that child is receiving the care they need, but also the environment they are living in is checked for lead hazards and those hazards are removed for everyone that might be exposed. Local and state health departments are on the front lines in communities across the state, ensuring food safety in restaurants, clean drinking water, safe housing, and the well-being of residents by addressing community health priorities. Tribal Health Departments provide essential health and community services to our 11 federally recognized tribal nations. Community-based organizations support Wisconsin's health and well-being by being a trusted source and providing access to resources such as food, shelter, mental health services and more.

Specifically, the Public Health Council is responsible for overseeing the [State Health Plan](https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/statehealthplan/index.htm) (<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/statehealthplan/index.htm>). The Department of Health Services is required to routinely produce a plan, developed with partners and communities from around the state, which is based on a comprehensive health assessment. The health assessment provides an overview of community conditions and the health of the people of Wisconsin. It summarizes the data that guides the selection of the priorities for the state health improvement plan. Our current 2023-2027 State Health Plan is focused on areas such as economic well-being, housing, childcare, access to healthcare, social connectedness, and mental health. It is critical that these top State Health issues be a focus of legislative consideration for funding and policy.

Funding for these priorities and for Public Health, in general, in our state is of grave concern. The State of Wisconsin is ranked 49th out of 50 States² in the US for funding public health. On average, \$124 per person is spent in the US on public health services³. In Wisconsin, it is \$69 per person. Less spending results in a less healthy population and increased risk related to public health emergencies. Wisconsin currently ranks 33rd out of 50 states in health outcomes. We have higher obesity, higher unsafe alcohol use, and higher cardiovascular disease and mental distress than states that provide more significant public health funding⁴. Less funding equates to our state's children starting life without access to healthy food. It means workers have substance use issues and mental health challenges that we could have prevented which also impacts their ability to work. It means people are more likely to live in housing, eat at a restaurant, or drink water that are unhealthy and unsafe.

Of critical importance is funding for our local and tribal health departments and community health funding for community-based organizations and community partners to address health gaps based on community health needs assessments. Local health departments are the backbone for public health work done in every community across Wisconsin. The only dedicated **state** funding for **required** public health services at a local level is a \$500,000 annual GPR appropriation for communicable disease control. Divided among Wisconsin's 84 local health departments, that funding averages just under \$6,000 per department per year to respond to and prevent the spread of serious diseases such as tuberculosis, measles, and pertussis.

As entities of county and city government, local health departments rely heavily on tax levy, disease-specific federal grants which now face increased uncertainty, and program revenue or fees. This leads to differences in programs and services and differences in health outcomes depending on a jurisdiction's investment in their local health department. Where you live should not determine your ability to receive essential public health services, your quality of life, or your life expectancy.

As we have described, the public health system in Wisconsin is already drastically underfunded. And the impact of emerging federal cuts to Wisconsin will likely be significant. A sizable portion of governmental public health department budgets come from federal sources for core public health services such as emergency preparedness, communicable disease prevention, WIC, and maternal health. Already, Wisconsin will lose more than \$210 million in federal funds that were to be used for mental health, substance abuse prevention and bolstering emergency medical services. Cuts to the Centers for Disease Control have already resulted in state losses to programs for suicide prevention; substance use prevention; public health departments, programs and laboratories including Emergency Medical Services; and the Wisconsin Immunization Registry. The legislature and governor need to be aware that the health of our State is at risk without a clear focus on public health priorities and funding.

An investment in Wisconsin's local public health system is long overdue. The Public Health Council stands ready to work with you to create a healthier Wisconsin. We look forward to being a resource to you as you make tough decisions about the budget. We know you care about the health of those that live, work, learn, and recreate in our state. Thank you for your time and consideration.

On the behalf of the Public Health Council,

Paula Mogen



Sources:

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1 W. Wilson Street ♦ Room 250 ♦ Madison, WI 53703
P.O. Box 2659 ♦ Madison, WI 53701-2659

DHSPublicHealthCouncil@wisconsin.gov ♦ <http://publichealthcouncil.wisconsin.gov>