

## **Governor Walz' Budget Has Child Maltreatment Reduction Measures**

A major takeaway from our [recent report on child fatalities](#) is that the single most effective way to reduce child maltreatment is to reduce the strains caused by poverty.

Governor Walz' budget has more proposals to do this than at any time in decades. It increases early learning scholarships by \$90 million annually, adds \$353 million to strengthen the overstretched and underpaid childcare network, and adds \$12.5 million in family home visiting slots. All of these will help reduce child abuse and neglect.

In upcoming emails we will ask our Minnesota supporters to encourage their state Representative and Senator to support these bills as they move through committees. Our emails include a sample message and a link connecting you directly to your own elected officials. Please send them! Be a part of pushing these long-awaited resources over the finish line!

Join us for a more detailed discussion and analysis of this week's article in our podcast, [here](#) or wherever you hear your favorite shows.

## **Narrative for podcast on Walz Budget**

If you follow up Minnesota news you will know that this is the year of the so-called trifecta, when the Democratic Farmer Labor party, or DFL, controls the Governor's office and both chambers of the legislature, although the latter by rather slim margins.

As a result a lot of Democratic business that has been waiting for years if not decades to get done is getting loaded into the current legislative session. From the point of view of families and children, this is a potentially banner year. Governor Tim Walz's budget proposals have more potential to help families and children than we have ever seen in our Minnesota lifetime.

These are particularly auspicious for reducing child abuse and neglect because they tackle some of the root causes of child maltreatment, namely the pressures and strains that are brought about by poverty and especially deep poverty, which is defined as half or less of the federal poverty level. As many of you know that that federal poverty level is also well below what is actually needed to both eat and keep a roof over a family's heads.

The potential to secure some services that support families and which help protect children is huge this year. So, we want to invite you to join us in lobbying the state legislature to move these bills through to completion. We make it pretty easy on you. If you aren't already on our mailing list just get on a website and sign up to volunteer or sign up for our blog. You will then get our emails. What we do during the session is to send you alerts about upcoming committee hearings as bills move through the legislative process. When you open these emails there is a message to your own state Representative and Senator. All you have to do is click on that and the message will send to your own elected officials. You also have the option to add a personal note or to modify the message if you so desire. The only exception is that some Senators require you to use their Senate mail service. This is really a pain in the neck. In these situations you have to copy the message that we provide for you, go to the legislative website at

[leg.mn.gov](http://leg.mn.gov), find your own Senator, and paste the message into their little square box for the email. Not very constituent friendly!

The other opportunity you will have is to join us in person on our annual Advocates Day at the legislature, or Day on the Hill as is often referred to. This will be held on Wednesday March 22. It is an all-day event but you can opt into the morning or the afternoon session. We need you to sign up early because what we do is actually set up appointments for you with your own state Senator and Representative. You get some basic training and some bullet points in the handout ready to go. If you have not done this before we always have an experienced veteran to join you in your meetings, and overall it is surprisingly easy non-stressful, and very satisfying. Over the years we have found that these 10 or 15 minute visits between our volunteer advocates and legislators have been more powerful in moving legislation than anything else we have done. So, please consider joining us. There will be information in our emails about how to sign up.

In the blog we reference our recent report on child fatalities in Minnesota. One of the main sections of that report explores the research on how poverty contributes to child maltreatment. Our analysis is that poverty is the most important single driver of child abuse and neglect. This is a tricky area to talk about because sometimes people deduce that this is somehow an accusation that poor people abuse their children. Of course, most poor people do not abuse their children. The point here is that poverty is a risk factor for abuse and alleviating it takes pressures off of parents, which in turn has positive effects for children.

For this reason we are supporting Governor Walz' proposals to dramatically increase early learning scholarships, by \$90 million a year. This will make a big dent in the backlog of families who could benefit from this service. And, children in child protection and foster care get top priority for these scholarships, including that for these children the age of eligibility is lowered from three years to birth. As we have said many times, early learning opportunities are one of the few services that have gold standard research showing that they actually decrease child maltreatment or reentry into the child protection system, in several studies by 50% or more. To put this \$90 million in perspective, there is a separate bill proposed by Child Care Aware which would pay for every child in the state who is eligible for an early learning scholarship, and the budget for that is \$558 million a year. So the \$90 million will make a huge dent but only get roughly 1/6 of the amount needed to cover everyone. Finally, there is a legislative bill that mirror's the Governor's \$90 million proposal, which gives the legislature an opportunity to show their bipartisan support for the measure.

Related to this, the Governor has a number of proposals which total \$353 million to build up the childcare industry. This responds to problems in the childcare sector that have existed for many years, which include a lack of child care in rural and some urban deserts, low rates and consequently low wages and high turnover of childcare workers, not enough programs to train early childhood workers, and other infrastructure problems that have made it difficult to run childcare programs in the state. One proposal is to increase the base rate for child care daily rates to 75% of the average among states. Another is to continue what are called "stabilization grants", which are monthly payments to child care providers to help them stay afloat.

Another major childcare proposal is to make permanent a recent reprioritization of eligibility for child care slots. Essentially the administration has changed priorities so that families who already are able to get childcare under MFIP don't take up slots for parents who don't qualify for that program. MFIP is the Minnesota Family Investment Program, which is the main federal public assistance program for families formerly known AFDC. Childcare waitlists from 2014-2022 were as high as 8,200 families with wait times up to two years. At one point temporary reprioritization reduced the wait list down to 372. The Walz proposal will make this reprioritization permanent.

Another proposal we are following is by the Minnesota Family Home Visiting Coalition for \$12.5 million annual proposal to increase the number of family home visiting slots. This is a somewhat disappointingly small investment which will only bring up to about 10% the number of families getting the service could use it in the state. High quality home visiting programs are the only other area, besides early learning programs, that have gold standard research showing that they reduce child maltreatment. A caution is that the gold standard research is for a class of programs called Nurse Home Visiting that are not practical in many rural areas or communities that don't have enough Public Health Nurses, or communities where Public Health has trouble engaging parents. This coalition has been working for years to make sure that all programs that do home visiting meet the same high quality standards for their staff training and curriculum.

There are other proposals such as funding for additional childcare for foster parents who can't afford to pay for this expensive service themselves. This will open up more foster homes for children among prospective foster parents and kinship caregivers who have to work.

There are a few areas where we are disappointed that there is no provision in the governor's budget or the legislature to increase allocations. One is for the Parent Support Outreach Program, known as PSOP. This program provides flexible funds for counties to use with families that have been reported to child protection but not screened in. The fiscal year 2023 allocation statewide is only \$4 million for this program. This is a true prevention/early intervention program. Again referring to our recent report, this is a program that takes the strain off of families in poverty in very pragmatic ways. For example funds can be used to pay for back rent, parking fines, buying a refrigerator, getting transportation to a health care for mental health care provider, or help with other similar basic needs. We did a project eight or nine years ago with students at the U of M to interview PSOP directors in five counties. One thing we discovered was that these programs write introductory letters that don't mention that they were referred to the families because of a screened out child maltreatment report. As a result, families were more willing to accept services from them than they would coming straight from child protection. This is an important theme we also talked about in the fatalities report, namely that to improve uptake of services like these, childcare, home visiting, and early learning scholarships, it is important that they are not perceived as being mandated by child protection.

We also found that the limits of a program like PSOP are that they do not require parents to address issues such as domestic violence, serious and persistent mental illness, and substance abuse. As a result, they tend not to be effective in reducing or even managing child maltreatment for these types of situations. However some of the information we gathered suggested, and this needs further study, that, consistent with the impact of other poverty

reducing measures, the PSOP program may have headed off families with some of these issues before they began to spiral downward into more serious child abuse and neglect.

Finally, there was no increase to the fund which is the state's main contribution to county child protection expenses, primarily for staff. This is called the Vulnerable Children and Adults Act. It includes funding for both adult and child maltreatment, and how it is allocated between the two groups depends on each county. We find this area to be somewhat of a puzzle. When we talk with caseworkers or County managers they tend to say that caseloads are high and workers are overwhelmed. For example we recently participated in a workgroup to development guidelines for foster care licensing, and the workers in that group also indicated that they are spread too thin and unable to cover all of the cases they are assigned. However there have been two studies we know of on caseload sizes since the 2015 Governor's Task Force on the Protection of Children, and both indicated that caseloads were quite manageable. Contributing to the possibility that caseloads are not overly large has been that there has not been lobbying by the AFSCME union or the counties to increase the state's contribution to county child protection and foster care costs. One possibility is that caseloads are manageable overall statewide but some counties or some units may not be fully staffed

In this regard, the conclusion we come to is that we need to have at least an annual survey of caseload sizes so that we know where there may be problems and are able to advocate more accurately for an appropriate state contribution to County child welfare operations.

So overall, in sum, we are hopeful that this will be a really good year for families and children in Minnesota, and we invite you to help us advocate to get these funding proposals all the way through the legislative process this year.

Rich Gehrman, Executive Director

Safe Passage for Children of Minnesota

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