

Legislative Advocacy Guide



WISCONSIN COUNCIL ON

**children
& families**

Raising Voices to Make Every Kid Count

Public Policy Advocacy: Influencing state government policymaking

Public policy can greatly impact children and families. But too often, policies are developed without full consideration of their impacts on children and without families' participation in the process. The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF) is working to change that by helping all stakeholders, including families, service providers, and other community members, engage in the process of effective advocacy.

Since the Wisconsin Legislature, Governor, and state agencies create and implement public policy, it is useful to understand how the Wisconsin government policymaking process works and how you can influence that process. This guide presents the basics about how individuals can advocate to make a difference for children in Wisconsin. It also provides information about the structure of Wisconsin's government, how a bill becomes a law in Wisconsin, and Wisconsin's budget process.

For additional details, contact WCCF, where experienced staff members can provide guidance about influencing policies in your particular area of concern.

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Section One: Legislators are influenced by YOU

Elected officials care about what their constituents have to say. To make a difference, you need to be informed and engaged. You don't need to be an expert, but your insight on the local impact of policy helps elected officials understand which policies work and which have a negative impact on children and families. Whether you advocate as an individual or as part of a group, your efforts will benefit from a little planning. Taking action can be as simple as joining WCCF's email network and responding to action alerts. If you have more time and interest, you can research an issue and phone your policymaker to express your opinions. If you are part of a larger group or effort, you might consider additional steps, such as communicating with your allies, testifying at hearings, or visiting your legislators in a meeting at the capitol.

Communicating with policymakers

Remember that in advocacy, respectful relationships build the foundation for change.

Before you communicate with a legislator, do your homework. Get to know your legislator by researching him/her on the Wisconsin Legislature website at <http://legis.wisconsin.gov>. Once you are on the website, click on the “Assembly” or “Senate” link. In the Assembly you would click on “Representatives Home Pages,” and in the Senate you would click on “Senators’ Home Pages,” then scroll down to your legislator’s name and click.

If you do not know who your legislators are, then click on “Who Represents Me” in the center of the page. By typing in your home address, the website will tell you who your legislators are and provide links to their home pages. This page will also give you a link to your Congressional Representative and United States Senators.

This website will give you the opportunity to:

- Learn his or her full name, length of time in office, and full-time profession.
- Learn about the demographics of the district and his or her voting records, committee assignments, and areas of interest.
- Look at the bills he or she has introduced in the past few years. If you find something that interests you, prepare some questions to find out more.
- Develop some questions you can ask to gauge his or her knowledge of and interest in your particular issue.

Remember that legislative aides are key support staff for legislators, and are important gatekeepers who can facilitate your relationship with your legislator. Some aides also have substantial influence on policy issues and help to shape their representative’s or senator’s positions. Regardless of how much policy influence a particular aide has, it will benefit you to establish a good working relationship with your legislator’s aide. Each one will appreciate any courtesies you can show, any help you offer the legislator, and any information you can provide to keep him or her fully informed.

In all of your interactions with policymakers and staff remember, remember these key points:

Be positive and nonpartisan. Legislators are turned off by threatening or argumentative advocacy. NEVER threaten a legislator (“I won’t vote for you if you don’t support this legislation.”)! Don’t argue. If it is clear that the policy maker will not support your position, just give the facts and ask him or her to consider your viewpoint. This will keep the lines of communication open for discussing future issues.

Be personal. Feel free to call your legislators’ office to share your views. Visits are better than letters or emails. Personal letters and emails are better than form letters. Sharing your personal experiences and concerns during a visit or in a letter/email will make your message more compelling.

Be persistent and patient. Building a relationship with your legislator and his/her staff takes time. Also, on many issues it may take several years to pass legislation.

Stay on message. Focus your visit, letter, or email on one topic. Use separate communications for different topics. During a visit, work to return to your topic if the legislator changes the subject.

Never give inaccurate information. It is far better to tell a legislator, “I don’t know, but I will find out and get back to you.” Your credibility (and the legislator’s if he/she uses your information) is at stake. Be sure to follow up with the complete information.

Relax. Advocacy does not have to be complex or intimidating. It’s simply you exercising your right as a citizen and having a conversation to express your views to the person elected to represent you. You do not need to be an expert. Just share your concerns and values, knowing that your views as a voter are important to your legislator.

Visits to public officials

Face-to-face visits are one of the most effective ways to develop a relationship with your legislator and to communicate your views. Legislators value visits and communication because it helps them stay in touch with their communities. Some legislators have office hours in their districts. Some legislators have town hall meetings in their districts. These are great opportunities to meet your legislator. All legislators have an office with staff in the Capitol in Madison. Legislators appreciate their constituents coming to Madison to share their concerns. Legislators also appreciate constituents making an appointment to meet with them and/or their staff. The following are some recommendations for visiting with legislators.

Before your meeting

Make an appointment. Call the legislator's office in Madison. You can find this number on the Wisconsin Legislature website. If you cannot meet with your legislator, meet with his/her legislative aide. Legislative aides are important sources of information, and may have substantial influence in the design, drafting and passage of legislation.

Develop an agenda. Think of the visit as a business meeting; go into the meeting with a plan and try to stick to it. If this is a group visit, make sure everyone introduces themselves to the legislator and/or staff. Decide which person in the group will lead the conversation. Visiting in a group can show the legislator that your cause has community support.

Develop and bring a fact sheet. A one-page statement detailing your position, with supporting data, will help the legislator understand your request. Include your name and contact information on this document.

Research your legislator's position on your issue. Find out if your legislator has already taken a position on your issue and consider this when framing your issue. Whether your legislator supports, opposes or is undecided on your issue, the legislator wants to meet with you to understand your views.

Be on time. If you are running late, call the office to alert them.

During the meeting

Introduce yourself to your legislator and his/her staff. Thank the legislator for taking the time to meet with you. Write down the name of the staff person you met with so you can follow up with that person after the meeting. State the purpose of your visit. Briefly describe the issue(s). More information on your issue can be included on your fact sheet that you have already prepared. Be upfront if you are asking for something specific, such as support or opposition to particular legislation.

Make the issue local and relevant. Discuss the issue from your local perspective – how it affects his or her district and voters. Use local statistics, stories, and fellow constituents to support your issue. Remind the legislator that you are a constituent and tell them where you live in the district.

Personalize the issue. Describe why the issue is important to you. Tell the legislator your story. The more personal the issue, the more he/she will pay attention.

Be a good listener. Let your legislator ask questions as you present your viewpoint and answer them knowledgeably and factually. You do not have to agree with his/her views, but you should show that you are willing to hear them. Ask if he/she has any questions for you. Ask how you can be helpful. Show interest in issues of concern to your legislator and offer your assistance when possible.

Stay on topic. Be careful not to let the meeting stray off course. Be sure to get your concerns on the table before engaging in small talk. Let the legislator make comments, but don't let him/her avoid the issue. Tactfully bring the conversation back on track.

Thank your legislator again for his or her time. Being courteous keeps the door open for future dialogue.

Leave materials. Leave your one-page fact sheet

with your name and contact information for follow-up questions. Provide copies to both the legislator and his/her staff person. Follow-up may be with the staff person, so they need the fact sheet as well.

After the meeting

Write a thank you note. Regardless of his or her position, courtesy is important. A handwritten thank you note also gives you another chance to make your pitch. An email note is better than none, but generally a handwritten note will have more impact.

Update your legislator on the issue throughout the year. If new materials—editorials, fact sheets, letters to the editor—appear in support of your cause, send them to the legislator.

Telephone calls to public officials

Calling a legislator's office is an efficient way to communicate your position to a legislator.

Before making the phone call, develop a concise list of points (no more than three) you want to make. If the legislator is unavailable, speak to the legislative aide.

Give your name and address to the legislative aide. This is extremely important because they want to be sure that you are a constituent.

Focus on one issue. If you have several bills that you want to discuss, consider separate phone calls, or select an alternate form of communication, such as email or a handwritten letter.

Be concise. Clearly state your position. If calling about a specific bill, use the bill number (“I am calling to ask Senator Jones to oppose SB 123.”)

Thank the aide. The person answering the phone is an important gatekeeper. Be courteous.

If your legislator votes favorably, send a note or an email to thank them. This follow-up expression of appreciation will help build a positive relationship.

Personal letters/emails to public officials

Legislators read correspondence, especially when it is personalized and clearly from a constituent. The following guidelines should be used when writing to your representative or senator.

Be brief (one page or less), and use your own words.

Begin with the appropriate heading and address.

Be specific: State the specific bill number and issue, and state your opinion in the first sentence.

Relate your experience with the issue. Use personal examples. Your interest and concern about the issue is what counts, not your expertise.

Ask the legislator to specifically commit to supporting or opposing the legislation you are writing about. Ask for specific reasons they are supporting or opposing the proposal. Sign and print your name and include your address and other contact information. If you have pertinent materials and/or editorials from local papers, include them.

Avoid form letters/emails if possible. If you *are* using a sample or form letter, be sure to adapt it, especially in the first sentence and paragraph! Legislators and their aides recognize form letters and are less likely to be swayed by them.

Thank him or her for considering your opinion.

Legislators value visits and communication because it helps them stay in touch with their communities.

Section Two: Structure of State Government

The structure of Wisconsin's state government is similar to that of the federal government. The three branches of state government are the executive branch (the governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general and state agencies), the legislative branch (the Wisconsin Legislature and its affiliate agencies and commissions), and the judicial branch (the court system, including the Wisconsin Supreme Court). In public policy advocacy, the legislative and executive branches are your primary targets.

The Legislative Branch

The Wisconsin Legislature is composed of the State Assembly and the Senate. The Wisconsin Legislature has the power to:

- enact laws not specifically prohibited by the state or federal constitution;
- pass resolutions, including ones that initiate public policy studies;
- levy taxes;
- approve the state budget; and
- confirm the governor's appointments of cabinet secretaries, state agency heads, and board members (Senate only).

The State Senate has 33 legislative districts, and the State Assembly has 99 legislative districts.

The Wisconsin Legislature meets for almost 18 months in a two-year legislative session. There are designated "on the floor" session days during this time. Committee work is done throughout the session. Compared to other states, Wisconsin has one of the longer legislative sessions. In the first year of the two-year session (the odd-numbered year) the legislature will pass the biennial budget. The Legislative session usually ends sometime in May of the second year (the even-numbered year) of the two year session. We encourage you to review "The Legislative Process in Wisconsin" at <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/lrb/pubs/feature/legispro.pdf>.

The Senate

The Wisconsin State Senate consists of 33 members. Each member is elected to a term of four years, and represents approximately 165,000 citizens.

The Assembly

The State Assembly consists of 99 members. Each member is elected to a term of two years and represents approximately 55,000 citizens.

The Executive Branch

The governor is elected to a four-year term. The governor has the power to:

- Act upon legislation passed by both Houses; he or she may sign a bill into law, suggest amendments, or veto the bill.
- Make appointments to state boards and commissions.
- Appoint cabinet secretaries and agency heads.
- Propose a biennial budget for consideration by the Wisconsin Legislature.



Section Three: Influencing Legislation - How a Bill Becomes Law

Bills

A bill is a proposal submitted by a member of the Legislature or the Governor to:

- create a new law;
- amend an existing law; or
- remove an existing law.

The idea for a bill may come from the Wisconsin Legislature, their constituents, lobbyists, the governor, cabinet secretaries or heads of state agencies charged with administering the law.

Committees

Most of the legislative process occurs in the specialized Standing Committees created by each chamber to handle proposed legislation. The current list of committees can be found on the Wisconsin Legislature website.

Assembly Committees –

<http://legis.wisconsin.gov/w3asp/commpages/Committees.aspx?house=assembly>

Senate Committees –

<http://legis.wisconsin.gov/w3asp/commpages/Committees.aspx?house=Senate>

What happens during a committee meeting?

The committee debates the merits of bills under consideration and hears testimony from interested parties. The chair of the committee determines which bills will be considered at a particular meeting. The author of the bill (the legislator who introduced the bill) is usually the first to speak, and introduces the bill to the committee. The public then has the opportunity to voice support for or opposition to a bill. Every citizen of Wisconsin has the right to attend a committee meeting and speak about legislation. Testimony from community members can and does influence legislators.

What can you do at a legislative hearing?

Fill out a hearing slip to register support for or opposition to a bill. You can find a hearing slip when you enter the hearing room at the state capitol. You can register to speak in support or opposition, or just register your support or opposition only, without speaking on the bill. You can also speak on a bill for informational purposes without indicating your support or opposition.

Use anecdotes, factual data, or personal experience to support your point.

Stay on message; short and to-the-point is more effective.

Pay close attention while committee members discuss the bill. Amendments could possibly change your opinion of the bill and affect your presentation.

Be prepared to answer questions from legislators.

Provide committee staff with written copies or a summary of your testimony to accompany your oral remarks, and include your name and contact information.

Reading your remarks is acceptable, but generally you will be more effective if you speak directly to the members, and just highlight the main points from your written material.

Adapt your remarks to avoid unnecessary repetition of points made by previous speakers.

Don't get rattled if a legislator leaves during your remarks. Legislators have many competing obligations during the session, and often need to attend another committee meeting simultaneously.

After the hearing on the bill, the chair of the committee will let committee members know when they will be expected to vote on the bill.

What happens to a bill reported out of committee?

If a bill is reported by a committee, it goes to its respective chamber (Assembly or Senate). It will be scheduled for a floor vote, where it is debated by the full chamber and voted up or down. If it passes, it goes to the other chamber to be considered. The process of considering the bill in the other chamber – committee vote, reported out of committee, scheduled for a floor vote – is the same. If the bill passes both chambers, it goes to the governor for signing.

What you can do as the bill is being debated in committee?

Call or email your legislator to urge his or her support or opposition. The Wisconsin Legislature website has your legislators' contact information.

Get your like-minded friends, co-workers, etc. to do the same.

Write letters to the editor of your local newspapers urging your legislator to support or oppose the bill.

What happens after a bill passes both the Assembly and Senate?

A bill that has passed both the Assembly and Senate is sent to the Governor.

The Governor can:

Sign the bill into law. If the governor takes no action on a bill within a certain amount of time, the bill automatically becomes law.

Veto the bill. The bill returns to the Assembly and Senate for reconsideration. The legislature can override the governor's veto and enact the bill into law with a two-thirds vote in each house.

What can you do after a bill passes both the Assembly and Senate?

Write letters to the editors of influential newspapers urging the governor to sign or veto the bill.

Call or email the governor to ask him or her to sign or veto the bill. Here's the Governor's contact information:

Website: <http://www.wisgov.state.wi.us/>

Email contact page: <http://www.wisgov.state.wi.us/Contact-Us>

Mail: Office of Governor, 115 East Capitol, Madison WI 53702

Phone: (608) 266-1212



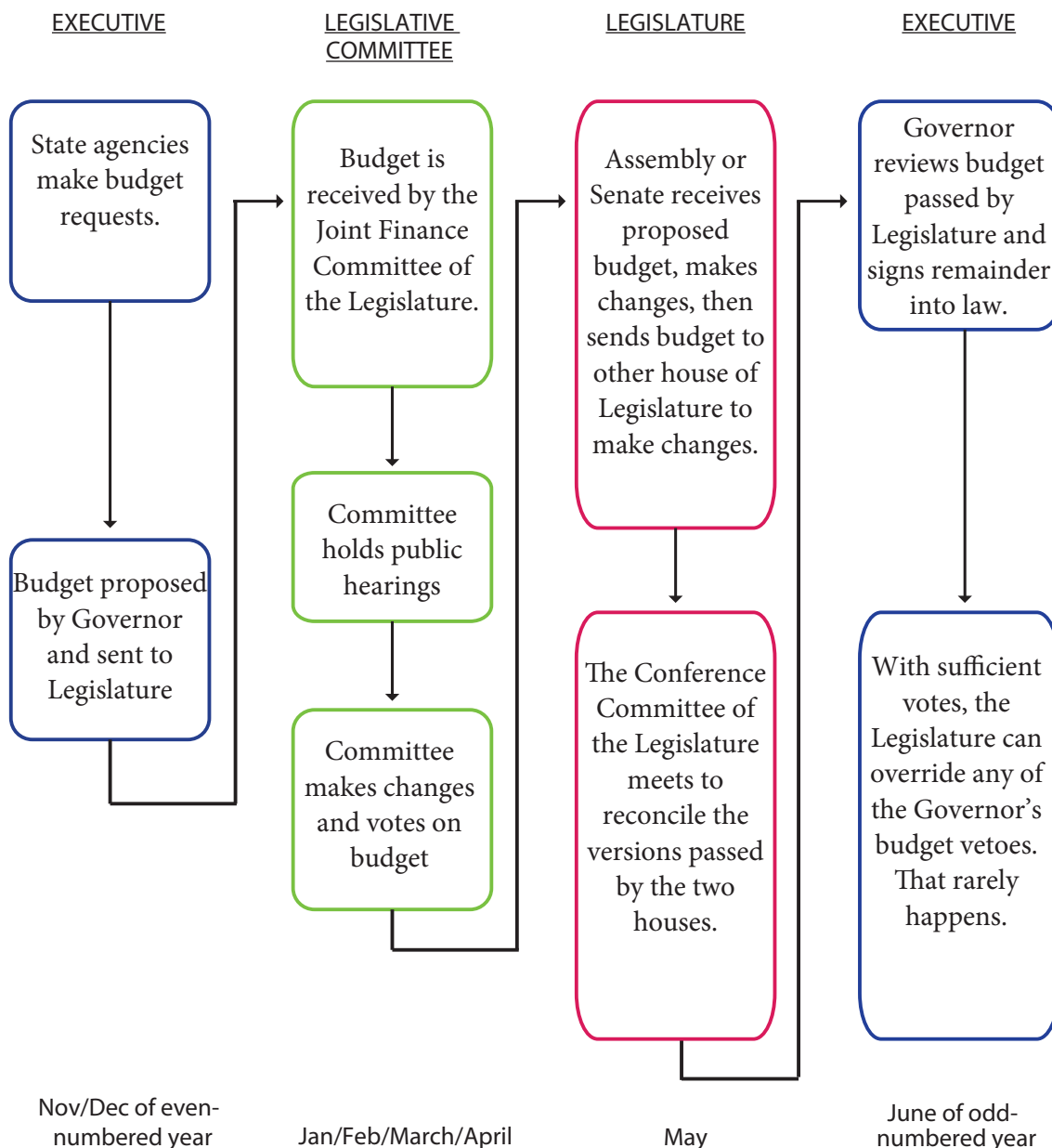
Section Four: Understanding the Budget Process

The Biennial Budget

Wisconsin has a biennial budget. This means that the state budget usually includes information about how money will be spent for a two-year period, from July of an odd-numbered year through June of the next odd-numbered year, for example from July 1, 2013 to June 30, 2015.

The state budget is the one bill that must be signed into law. No money can be expended without first being appropriated in the budget, with a few exceptions discussed in the next section. Chart 14 shows a graphical representation of the process.

Chart 14: The Budget Process



The entire process of developing a budget starts in the fall of even-numbered years, when state agencies must submit their budget requests to the Governor. These requests are not just wish lists; usually the agencies are given guidance by the governor in terms of limiting their overall spending or promoting certain services.

In Wisconsin, the Governor will usually introduce his/her budget in mid-February of the odd year of the legislative session (first year of the two-year session). The Governor and the two political parties in the Legislature often have different priorities regarding how to raise and spend money. This can make for contentious negotiations before the budget is finally enacted.

What can you do before the Governor introduces his/her state budget?

Contact the Governor directly using the following contact information, and inform the Governor about your priorities for the state budget.

- You can request to meet with the governor's staff and/or cabinet secretaries to discuss the need for new funding.
- You can write letters to the editors of influential newspapers in support of new funding.

Website: <http://www.wisgov.state.wi.us/>

Email contact page: <http://www.wisgov.state.wi.us/Contact-Us>

Mail: Office of Governor, 115 East Capitol, Madison WI 53702

Phone: (608) 266-1212

From there, the budget process moves over to the Legislature. Its first step is the Joint Finance Committee, which is made up of legislators appointed by leaders in both houses of the Legislature. The Joint Finance Committee (JFC) conducts a series of hearings around the state, so people can come and give their input on the budget. Once they've gathered information from those hearings and other sources, the Joint Finance Committee prepares its own version of the budget. The JFC budget can be quite different

from the Governor's proposal.

What can you do when the Joint Finance Committee and the Legislature are debating the state budget?

- You can testify at the committee hearings.
- You can meet with your legislators to request that they support your policy proposal and/or propose an amendment.
- You can call or email your legislators and Joint Finance Committee members to ask them to support or oppose specific budget amendments.
- You can get your like-minded friends, co-workers, etc. to do the same.
- You can write letters to the editor of your local paper expressing support or opposition for particular budget amendments.

Contact information for the Wisconsin Legislature and info on the state budget can be found here—
<http://legis.wisconsin.gov/>
<http://legis.wisconsin.gov/w3asp/waml/waml.aspx>
Wisconsin Budget Project www.wisconsinbudgetproject.org

The next step for the budget is either the full Assembly or the full Senate. One house takes the Joint Finance version of the bill and allows members to propose amendments and changes and to debate their ideas on the floor. Eventually, the full membership of that house votes on the entire bill. Once they pass their version of the budget, the bill moves over to the other house of the Legislature, where the whole process takes place again. If the two houses end up passing versions of the bill that are different from each other – which they often do – then a Conference Committee consisting of members from each house is usually appointed to iron out the differences between the two versions.

Once the Conference Committee comes up with a compromise version of the bill, it goes back to both houses for approval. No amendments or changes are allowed at this point; just a yes or no vote.

After both houses pass the budget bill, it lands on the Governor's desk. In Wisconsin, the Governor has the power to make line-item vetoes, which means he can cross out whole items, change dollar values, or delete language to make things more to his liking. The Legislature has the power to override a Governor's veto, but it takes a two-thirds vote of both houses to do so, and that rarely happens. Finally the budget is signed into law.

The budget is supposed to be finalized by July 1 of the odd-numbered year, because that's when the revenue and spending levels set by the new budget are supposed to go into effect. Sometimes, though, the budget process drags out longer, and it's not unusual for the budget to be signed as late as the fall of an odd-numbered year. If the budget is late, revenues and spending are carried over at the level in the previous budget until the new budget is finally signed.

Section Five: Advocacy Resources

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families www.wccf.org

Learn more about early care and education, juvenile justice, health care, economic security and tax and budget issues. You can also sign up for our email lists to receive timely advocacy and legislative updates regarding children's issues.

Check out WCCF's blog www.wiskids.blogspot.com

Like WCCF on Facebook www.facebook.com/wiskids

Follow WCCF on Twitter www.twitter.com/wiskids

The Wisconsin Budget Project www.wisconsinbudgetproject.org

The Wisconsin Budget Project is a WCCF initiative engaged in analysis and education on the state budget and tax issues, particularly those relating to low- and moderate-income families. The Budget Project seeks to broaden the debate on budget and tax policy through public education and the encouragement of civic engagement on these issues.

Check out the Wisconsin Budget Project blog www.wisconsinbudgetproject.blogspot.com

Like the Wisconsin Budget Project on Facebook www.facebook.com/wisconsinbudgetproject

Follow the Wisconsin Budget Project on Twitter www.twitter.com/wibudgetproject

The Wisconsin Legislature <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/>

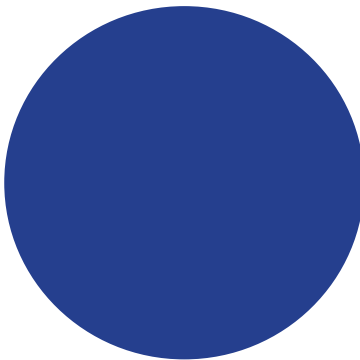

The Wisconsin State Assembly <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/asmhome.htm>

This Wisconsin State Senate <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/senhome.htm>

WisEye <http://www.wiseye.com>

The Kids Count Data Center <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/>

Access hundreds of measures of child well-being, including all those in the *Data Book* and the *Right Start for America's Newborns*, and local data from 53 grantees.



The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families is a statewide, multi-issue, non-partisan child advocacy organization. The mission of WCCF is to ensure that every child in Wisconsin grows up in a just and nurturing family and community. WCCF provides research, policy analysis, public education and advocacy that lead to improved outcomes for children in the areas of health, economic security, safety and education. We believe that children need strong voices representing them, and so are committed to using research, policy analysis, and public education to raise voices to make every kid count.



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