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**For immediate release
February 14, 2011**

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Medicaid Power Shift Stifles Debate and Does Not Belong in Budget Repair Bill

As has been noted in numerous media reports about the budget repair bill proposed by Gov. Walker, most of the attention and reaction so far has focused on the sweeping attack it makes on the rights of public employees. But much less attention has been paid to other seriously misguided provisions in the bill.

WCCF is particularly alarmed by language in the bill that would give the Department of Health Services the ability to rewrite Medicaid policy with minimal input from the Legislature or the public. This would include changes related to benefits, reimbursement, eligibility, and a wide range of other important aspects of Medicaid policy.

The proposal would give the Administration the authority to implement emergency rules allowing them to quickly and without meaningful debate make critical changes that supercede statutes currently on the books. Moreover, the Administration would be able to extend the emergency rules indefinitely, with no obligation to define the emergency or identify what would mark its end.

Let us be clear, we know that the state has significant budget challenges. However, it is important that the "solutions" proposed actually address the challenges that we have. This proposal does not do that. The purpose of the budget repair bill is to balance the state's books for the current biennium. Yet the sweeping shift of authority for setting Medicaid policy would yield NO savings in this biennium. In fact, the Legislative Fiscal Bureau indicated today that this portion of the bill constitutes non-fiscal policy (see <http://thewheelerreport.com/releases/February11/0214/0214lfbnonfiscal.pdf>). This portion of the bill will do nothing to address Wisconsin's budget hole this biennium.

What this proposal does accomplish is to severely limit the debate on this very important issue and to weaken the legislative branch of government. WCCF believes this unprecedented seizure of legislative authority by the Administration is antithetical to the principles of democracy we treasure in Wisconsin. We elect legislators to make policy choices and spending decisions, and to provide their constituents an opportunity for input in those decisions. We don't expect important decisions that will affect the health of hundreds of thousands of Wisconsinites to be made behind closed doors by unelected administrative officials, with minimal public involvement.

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