Monday April 24, 2017

Dear Honorable Members of the Joint Committee on Finance,

YWCA Madison writes this letter to express both our support and concern with several provisions in Governor Walker’s Proposed Wisconsin State Budget.

To begin, we ask you to support changes to the Wisconsin Shares childcare subsidy that allow families to transition gradually off of support. Currently, families receiving childcare subsidies lose that support when their income rises above 200 percent of the poverty line. The sudden loss of funding has detrimental financial impacts, and parents are forced to choose between a wage increase or childcare. Because quality childcare is both costly and hard to secure, many parents turn down promotions, pay increases, or additional hours so they can keep their childcare funds. At YWCA Madison, we know first-hand clients who have faced this dilemma. Under the proposed budget, families will no longer experience a sudden “cliff” but rather will be eased off of support through a gradual decrease of benefits as their incomes rise. Not only will this ensure Wisconsin’s children remain in quality childcare, but it will allow parents to pursue and achieve financial stability.

Next, there are several provisions in the proposed budget that will harm low-income Wisconsin residents. We ask you to remove them from the budget.

First, we strongly oppose any provision in the budget that limit access to FoodShare. Income should be the only qualifier. When individuals do not make enough money to feed themselves or their family, the state should provide them with nutritious food. Wisconsin already limits FoodShare, requiring some recipients to work or participate in work training and requiring some recipients to complete drug tests. These conditions have serious consequences: According to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, since the state instituted these changes in 2015, FoodShare participants in Dane County decreased from more than 70,000 residents in 2014 to less than 63,000 in 2016. Meanwhile, in our experience as the largest shelter provider for women and families in Dane County, the local need for FoodShare has increased. Wisconsin residents are going hungry.

The proposed child support conditions to FoodShare will leave parents’ and their children without food. There are many reasons why paternity determination, and any subsequent child support payments, can be complicated. While ideally providing child support is in the best interest of the child, circumstances of life and family often create other priorities. Additionally, the state is all too willing to label an individual as “failing to cooperate fully”. One of our current YWCA shelter residents, Lashaua, lost her W-2 and childcare funding because the state failed to enter her change of address when she moved into our shelter. The state declared that she was no longer cooperating. Lashaua was able to correct the state’s error, but not before losing several months of childcare funding and jeopardizing job training. How many individuals is the state willing to remove from FoodShare and deny food access for this and other errors?

Second, we are alarmed at the proposed $3 million cut from Emergency Assistance. This essential program keeps Wisconsin residents and their families from falling into homelessness by providing one-time funding for emergency needs, such as paying rent, utility bills, and medical bills. EA funding is essential for domestic violence survivors who flee from their abusers often with no money or housing. YWCA Madison has many clients who rely on EA to move from shelter into stable housing. We also know of many who have justly requested EA funds but have been denied, leaving them with no safety net. The Emergency Assistance grants should be expanded, not cut.

Next, we oppose eliminating the Parole Commission. The current Parole Commission already has a tremendous backlog: It is estimated that there are 3,000 Wisconsin citizens incarcerated in Wisconsin who are currently eligible for parole. By replacing the Parole Commission with a single, politically-appointed individual, this backlog will get longer. There are human lives at stake, and Wisconsinites who have already served their court-ordered time will pay the price. Wisconsin’s criminal justice system already has some of the highest racial disparities in the nation. When you prolong the incarceration time beyond eligible parole release, you are disproportionately impacting men of color.

Fourth, we oppose drug testing. Expanding drug testing to more individuals on W-2 and all FSET participants wastes both taxpayer money. It is well documented that benefit recipients are no more likely to use drugs than any other segment of the population. State after state, from Florida to Michigan, has discovered that drug testing yields almost no results and costs taxpayers millions of dollars. W-2 and FSET recipients need access to training and jobs, not drug testing. By expanding drug testing for W-2 and FSET recipients, instead of relying on performance and/or success in the program itself, you perpetuate the false myth that those on public assistance are gaming the system.

Finally, we have strong concerns with expanding the state’s FSET training requirement. YWCA Madison supports employment training, and we appreciate the goal of FSET to help residents develop job skills and find gainful employment. However, FSET training does not successfully do that. The training fails to provide the actual work skills needed to rise out of poverty. Until the state changes FSET, its expansion will not serve Wisconsin well and only creates a new reason to push citizens off state assistance.

Thank you for your attention to these items. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me or Carousel Bayrd, our Policy and Partnership Coordinator, at (608) 395-2196.

Sincerely,

Vanessa McDowell  
Interim CEO