



**Caring For Young Victims
of the Opioid Crisis**

Early childhood care and education programs are powerful tools in battling the opioid epidemic in Wisconsin

Acknowledgements

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42,000
the number of
Americans who died
of an opioid overdose
in 2016

Wisconsin is facing an epidemic of opioid misuse and our young children are among its victims. Parental substance abuse is a significant Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) that impedes children's future citizen readiness—their ability to grow up healthy, well-educated and prepared for productive lives. The epidemic has seriously compromised the strength of our state: threatening public safety, impacting the workforce, tearing families apart, and likely decreasing the number of youth eligible for military service.

High-quality early care and education programs, including child care, Head Start, preschool, and home visiting, offer a powerful approach to helping children impacted by the opioid crisis. By investing in these programs, policymakers can help prepare these children to avoid crime, raise families of their own, and contribute to the workforce, including serving in the military if they choose.

“ I've seen firsthand the impact opioid abuse has on families in our communities. Prioritizing prevention services is key to steering the next generation of Wisconsinites away from addiction and towards productive lives.



Chief Sean M. Marschke
Sturtevant Police Department,
President-Elect, Wisconsin
Chiefs of Police Association



The opioid crisis is exacting a heavy toll on Wisconsin

In 2016, 11.8 million Americans misused opioids. The vast majority (92 percent) misused prescription pain relievers, approximately 3 percent used heroin, and the remaining 5 percent did both.¹ Deaths due to opioid overdoses have skyrocketed over the past two decades, increasing 500 percent since 1999.² In 2016, more than 42,000 Americans died of an opioid overdose—more than 116 each day.³ Wisconsin had an opioid-related death rate of 15.8 deaths per 100,000 persons, higher than the national rate of 13 per 100,000.⁴ The economic impact of the opioid crisis is staggering: When costs to

the health and criminal justice systems and to employers are tallied, the annual national total reaches \$504 billion.⁵ In Wisconsin in 2015, the opioid crisis cost \$409 million in health care costs alone.⁶

Many initiatives have been launched in Wisconsin, in response to the opioid crisis. Rep. John Nygren has championed the HOPE (Heroin, Opioid Prevention and Education) Agenda, a package of 30 legislative proposals passed by the state legislature and signed into law by Governor Walker.⁷ We now need to focus on another aspect of the opioid crisis: its impact on young children.

Young children are victims of the opioid epidemic

About half of opioid overdose deaths occur among people ages 25-44; it is likely that many of these are parents.⁸ From 2008 to 2012, more than one-third of childbearing-age women receiving Medicaid and more than one quarter of similar-aged women with private health insurance filled a prescription for opioids. Given this rate of prescribing for childbearing-age women and the large number of Americans who misuse

\$409 million 
the total health care costs due to the opioid crisis in Wisconsin in 2015.

opioids, it is clear that many children live with parents who misuse opioids.⁹ In fact, every 25 minutes, a baby is born suffering from opioid withdrawal, due to maternal opioid use during pregnancy; **Wisconsin has a rate of 8.9 of these babies per 1,000 births.**¹⁰

Parental substance abuse is an adverse childhood experience with far-reaching impact

The years from birth to age 5 are a critical period for brain development, with more than one million neural connections forming every second.¹¹ Research has shown that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as having a parent who abuses substances, can induce toxic stress, which impairs brain development.¹² Moreover, the effects of this early adversity reach far into adulthood, impacting health and well-being throughout life. As the number of ACEs increases, so does the risk for numerous negative adult outcomes, including substance abuse, as well as other physical and mental health problems, perpetuating the cycle.¹³ In particular, researchers have found that ACEs can impact a child's likelihood of later opioid use: in one study, people who experienced more than four childhood traumas were three times more likely to abuse prescription pain relievers and five times more likely to inject drugs in adulthood, compared to those who did not experience any trauma.¹⁴

Parental substance abuse impacts children in many ways.¹⁵ When parents abuse substances, they are often less likely to provide stable, nurturing care to their children and may even resort to neglect or abuse. Parental substance abuse can also be associated with chaotic, unsafe home environments. Other associated risk factors

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include parental mental health issues, domestic violence, unstable housing, unemployment, etc.¹⁶ As a result, parental substance abuse often leads to youth being placed in alternative living situations, such as foster care. In Wisconsin, the number of children placed in foster care or other out-of-home settings due to parent drug abuse more than doubled from 2009 to 2016.¹⁷

Early childhood programs are key supports for children and families affected by the opioid crisis

The opioid crisis is a complicated problem that requires a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach involving many sectors: health, education, law enforcement, etc. Early childhood programs are one important piece of the puzzle. High-quality early care and education programs—child care, Head Start, preschool, and home visiting—can



“ As this issue affects all industries, we need to help children impacted by the opioid crisis now to get the workforce we want later.



S. Mark Tyler
President, OEM Fabricators, Inc.
(Woodville)

serve as a powerful two-generation method of helping families affected by the opioid crisis. Research has shown that these programs promote several aspects of healthy child development.¹⁸ Home visiting programs can also help addicted parents achieve sobriety by connecting them with treatment.¹⁹

While participating in high-quality child care and early education programs, children can experience stable, warm and nurturing environments and relationships, and also receive screenings for developmental problems and referrals to treatment. Early childhood care and education programs also serve as respite for parents who can be overwhelmed with

the care of their children. Program staff can model healthy caregiver-child relationships and foster their development between parents and their children. Comprehensive programs can also direct parents to needed community resources, including substance abuse treatment and other services. In Wisconsin, 80 percent of four-year-olds but only 1 percent of three-year-olds participate in pre-kindergarten or Head Start.²⁰

Further, research has shown that high-quality early childhood care and education programs can help put at-risk children on the track for success in school and in life, increasing school readiness, improving short- and long-term school outcomes, reducing behavior problems, and even contributing to less criminal behavior. For example, North Carolina's Smart Start (child care) and More at Four (preschool) initiatives found that the children in counties that spent more per student were two months ahead in reading and 1.5 months ahead in math by fifth grade when compared with children in counties that spent less.²¹ After attending the Tulsa, Oklahoma Head Start program, participants had higher state test scores in math in 7th grade and were 31 percent less likely to be held back by 8th grade.²² Participants in Michigan's state pre-K were held back in school 51 percent less often than non-participants and had a 35 percent increase in high school graduation rates.²³ A recent study of Oklahoma's universal pre-K program found the program decreased the likelihood that black children were later charged with a misdemeanor or felony crime at age 18 or 19.²⁴



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In response to parental substance abuse and other ACEs, some early care and education programs have also incorporated “trauma-informed care” into their practices.²⁵ For example, some Head Start programs use “Trauma Smart” (TS), an early education /mental health partnership that includes teacher training, mental health consultation, and clinical treatment.²⁶ A preliminary study of TS yielded promising results, with parents and teachers reporting improvements in children’s behavior.²⁷ A rigorous randomized control trial study is in progress. In Wisconsin, the Trauma Smart program is offered in Keshena Primary School, in the Menominee Indian School District.²⁸

The Wisconsin Fostering Futures Initiative focuses on “integrating trauma-informed culture, policies and practices (safety, self-regulation and relationships) at the child/family/community and systems levels to address the epidemic of toxic childhood stress.”²⁹ This approach can also be infused into early childhood programs in the state, as one of the key child-serving systems.

Policymakers must continue to invest in quality early childhood programs

High-quality early care and education programs yield significant benefits for disadvantaged children. These programs



are even more essential now, as many young children are faced with parental substance abuse, including the dramatic increase in opioid addiction. As part of the comprehensive response to the opioid crisis, policymakers must continue to support children’s access to high-quality early care and education programs, including child care, preschool, Head Start, and home visiting.

Conclusion

The opioid crisis poses a serious threat to current and future child well-being, and, therefore, to public safety, the economy, and national security. Early childhood programs serve as powerful tools in battling the opioid crisis and mitigating its negative impact on young children; thus Wisconsin policymakers should dedicate state resources to strengthen these programs. Investing in young children now will help ensure that our next generation will be citizen-ready, despite the serious challenges presented by the opioid epidemic.

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