

Candidate Engagement 2026

WAFCA Lunch & Learn

July 14th, 2026



Agenda

- ❑ Why Candidate Engagement Matters
- ❑ How to Get Involved: Steps for Effective Engagement
- ❑ 501(c)(3) Guidelines: Restricted vs. Unrestricted Activities
- ❑ How to tell your story
- ❑ Identifying Candidates & Important Voting Information
- ❑ Candidate Questions
- ❑ Reflections, Resources & Next Steps

Why Candidate Engagement Matters

- ▶ Election season is a **key time** for raising awareness of the public policy **issues that matter** for Wisconsin's communities.
- ▶ Engaging with candidates **builds early relationships with policymakers** and aligns with a nonpartisan approach to **educating decision-makers and influencing policy change**.
- ▶ People who volunteer to run for office are providing an important public service and **engagement with them helps to advance community well-being**.

Why Candidate Engagement Matters

- ▶ **Early Relationships:** Connecting with candidates helps to influence their priorities.
- ▶ **Nonpartisan Advocacy:** Engaging with both incumbents and challengers ensures a balanced approach, fostering understanding across the political spectrum.
- ▶ **Amplifying Issues:** Candidates have influence within their communities and drawing their attention to issues during campaign season elevates public awareness.

How to Get Involved

- ▶ **Reach out to Candidates via their Websites/Email/Social Media:** Reach out to candidates to share priorities and questions about their commitment on issues important to your agency and community.
- ▶ **Attend Forums and Events:** Participate in events hosted by candidates and other civic organizations to learn about their platforms and introduce them to important advocacy priorities.
- ▶ **Use public forums to message priorities:** Write letters to the editor and/or post op-eds to your social media accounts.
- ▶ **Voter Support and Civic Engagement:** Share resources to help voters register and encourage turnout. Provide assistance to address barriers.
- ▶ **Build Long-Term Relationships:** Continuously engage with both incumbents and challengers to establish lasting connections that transcend election cycles. Remember that policymakers need to be generalists on a wide range of issues and they rely on trusted constituents to provide expertise.

Steps for Effective Engagement

- ▶ **Research Candidate Platforms:** Understand the key issues and positions of each candidate to be informed.
- ▶ **Schedule a Meeting:** Contact candidates' offices to schedule meetings, invite them for an on-site visit and help them directly experience an issue, program or resource.
- ▶ **Prepare Your Message:** Be clear about advocacy priorities, your own experiences and stories, and how they align with the candidate's interests and community needs.
- ▶ **Follow Up:** Maintain ongoing communication with candidates to reinforce the relationship and keep priorities and your own causes on their radar.
- ▶ **Report Back:** After you connect, share insights and outcomes from your meetings and interactions with your WAFCA advocacy team. You can email Sandy: spkarri@wafca.org with any candidate engagement-related questions and updates before or after a visit.

Prohibited Activities for 501(c)(3) Organizations

- ▶ Endorsing a candidate
- ▶ Holding a political/campaign fundraiser at your site
- ▶ Allowing a candidate to circulate nomination papers on your property
- ▶ Putting a yard sign on property
- ▶ Indicating support for one party or another on behalf of the organization
- ▶ Using federal funds for any lobbying activities
- ▶ Spending a “substantial part” of time/effort on lobbying

Lobbying - Should be Minimal and Restricted for Nonprofits

- ▶ Calling a legislator to ask them to vote in support of a specific bill
- ▶ Requesting that the Medicaid Director change a specific administrative rule
- ▶ Providing testimony in support or opposition to a bill at a public hearing

Advocacy and Education (Non- Lobbying Activities) - Unrestricted and Encouraged for Nonprofits

- ▶ Educating an elected official about a community issue you want them to pay attention to
- ▶ Calling a legislator and telling them to support efforts that expand access to mental health care
- ▶ Conducting a visit with a lawmaker and showing them your agency's work
- ▶ Voter registration efforts (must be non-partisan such as by a group like Disability Rights WI)

Advocacy and Education (Non- Lobbying Activities) - Unrestricted and Encouraged for Nonprofits Cont.

- ▶ Submitting an information-only memo on a topic to a state legislator
- ▶ Responding to requests for information from policymakers
- ▶ Sending a letter to an elected official and asking them to consider your subject matter expertise on family services and mental health issues

How To Tell Your Story

- ▶ **Share a story of a child or family's journey** - who they were, the challenges they faced, and how your services changed their outcome.
- ▶ **Connect the story to the bigger picture.** Explain how your services make that success possible and what happens when funding falls short.
- ▶ **Show the impact with data.** Share the number of children and families served, waitlist trends, outcomes, and your agency's role in serving these children and families.
- ▶ **Highlight your workforce.** Explain how different professionals work together to support children, and why sustainable funding is essential to recruit and retain them.
- ▶ **Demonstrate the continuum of care.** Describe how your agency helps children receive the right level of care, and how the current systems poses barriers to access and adequate and timely care.
- ▶ **Bring your work to life.** Offer a tour of your agency so candidates can meet staff, see programs in action, and understand the impact firsthand.

Identifying Candidates

- ▶ **Ballotpedia**

- ▶ [Wisconsin gubernatorial and lieutenant gubernatorial election, 2026](#)
- ▶ [Wisconsin State Assembly elections, 2026](#)
- ▶ [Wisconsin State Senate elections, 2026](#)
- ▶ [United States House of Representatives elections in Wisconsin, 2026](#)

- ▶ **What's on your ballot exercise (Kathy)**

Important Voting Information

- ▶ Visit [MyVoteWisconsin](https://myvote.wisconsin.gov) to register to vote/verify registration and find your polling location.
- ▶ **Primary Election information**
 - ▶ Voter registration deadline: In-person: Aug. 11, 2026 | By mail: Postmarked by July 22, 2026 | Online: July 22, 2026
 - ▶ Absentee/mail-in ballot request deadline: In-person: Aug. 9, 2026 | By mail: Received by Aug. 6, 2026 | Online: Aug. 6, 2026
 - ▶ Absentee/mail-in ballot return deadline? In-person: Aug. 11, 2026 | By mail: Received by Aug. 11, 2026

Candidate Questions: Prevention and Early Intervention

- ▶ Research consistently shows that early intervention and prevention services reduce unnecessary child welfare involvement and improve long-term outcomes. **As Wisconsin balances funding across its treatment systems, do you support increasing the state's investment in prevention services? Why or why not?**
- ▶ School-based mental health services have expanded in Wisconsin, but funding remains limited and inconsistent. **What steps would you support to create a sustainable long-term funding model for school-based mental health services?**
- ▶ Family Resource Centers help strengthen families and reduce risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect. **Would you prioritize increasing state funding for Family Resource Centers to provide greater access across the state?**

Candidate Questions: Complex Needs/Continuum of Care

- ▶ Families often struggle to access timely behavioral health services for children with unmet complex needs. The Children's Behavioral Health Initiative seeks to coordinate services across agencies and expand access to robust wraparound services and supports for these families to meet the specialized needs and address regional disparities in resource access. **Would you support a more integrated behavioral health system for children and youth?**
- ▶ Residential Care Centers, Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities, Youth Crisis Stabilization Facilities remain an important part of the service continuum for some youth. The daily rate funding model places this service capacity at risk. **Would you support foundational funding to ensure that we maintain access to these critical services while also promoting community-based alternatives whenever appropriate?**
- ▶ Wisconsin's Medicaid reimbursement rates for mental health and substance use services have not kept pace with the cost of care. Agencies that provide significant access to Medicaid-funded individuals face greater challenges recruiting and retaining quality workforce. **Do you support increasing reimbursement rates to improve access and outcomes for children and families?**

Candidate Questions: Workforce

- ▶ Compared to other states, Wisconsin has a higher overall percentage of individuals with some level of health insurance coverage, however, working families who are not eligible for public programs still struggle with affordability and access - facing narrow networks of providers, high deductibles and co-pays. Medicaid is responding to access challenges by covering a wider array of providers including peers and in-training therapists. **How would you support continuing to advance parity in mental health coverage and reduce barriers to access?**
- ▶ Behavioral health providers often cite licensing, supervision, and credentialing requirements as barriers to workforce growth. **Would you support a centralized Medicaid credentialing system to reduce administrative burdens for providers? Why or why not?**
- ▶ The Qualified Treatment Trainee (QTT) grant program helps agencies employ and supervise clinicians who are entering the profession. **Do you support increasing state investment in this program, and what other workforce investments would you prioritize?**

Reflections - How can we support you?

- ▶ How can WAFCA best support your advocacy and candidate engagement efforts?
- ▶ How do you envision using what you learned today in your organization?
- ▶ Do these candidate questions align with your advocacy goals and priorities?
- ▶ Are there additional questions you think candidates should be asked?
- ▶ What additional resources, tools, or support would help you prioritize candidate engagement over the coming months?

WAFCA Resources

- ▶ [Election and Message Guidance 2026](#)
- ▶ [WAFCA Legislative Advocacy 101](#)
- ▶ [2027-28 Policy and Budget Priorities \(as of 7.26\)](#)

Next Steps

- ▶ WAFCA will publish Fact Sheets in the upcoming weeks
- ▶ Second Lunch & Learn on August 12th
- ▶ WAFCA Candidate Outreach week of September 14th
 - ▶ Members are encouraged to reach out to candidates the following week

Candidate Engagement Lunch &
Learn 2026



Brief survey

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THANK YOU!!!!!!

QUESTIONS? Contact Sandy Plascencia Karri: spkarri@wafca.org