



Candidate Engagement & Messages 2026

Legal disclaimer: This document does not constitute legal advice. Please engage legal counsel for official guidance on non-profit rules and regulations regarding lobbying and advocacy.

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.

Considerations as you engage: While you may have a professional/agency-based interest or expertise to share, this resource is intended to help you connect as an individual constituent. While you may also use these resources to support your organization/agency-based outreach, be mindful of the following:

- Be aware of your organization/employer policies and seek authorization to coordinate any candidate engagement on behalf of your organization/agency.
- If you invite a candidate or elected official to visit with a program/coalition, remember that this engagement should always be nonpartisan and focused on issue education.
- Invitations should be extended to all candidates for office.
- Your organization or meeting should not be a place for candidates to seek endorsement or share their literature. Be cautious about a candidate using photos or quotes from the visit/event.

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 or Email:** Reach out to candidates to share priorities and questions about their commitment on issues you care about.
- **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.
- **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

1. **Research Candidate Platforms:** Understand the key issues and positions of each candidate to be informed.
2. **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.
3. **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.
4. **Follow Up:** Maintain ongoing communication with candidates to reinforce the relationship and keep priorities and your own causes on their radar.
5. **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.

General Guide for Non-Profit Advocacy/Election Activity

<u>Prohibited Activities for 501(c)(3) Organizations</u>	• 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
<u>Lobbying – Should be Minimal and Restricted for Nonprofits</u>	• 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
<u>Advocacy and Education (Non-Lobbying Activities) – Unrestricted and Encouraged for Nonprofits</u>	• 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 the League of Women Voters) • 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

Source: Adapted from WAFCA partner WPHCA <https://www.wphca.org/public-policy/advocate-resources/>

Other Resources:

- [WAFCA Legislative Advocacy 101](#)
- [Election dos and don'ts](#) (Independent Sector)
- [Staying Nonpartisan for Nonprofits Doing Voter Engagement](#) (Nonprofit VOTE)
- [Ballotpedia](#) ([State Assembly](#); [State Senate](#); [Gubernatorial](#); [Congressional](#))
- [Vote411](#)
- [Wisconsin Disability Vote Coalition](#)

WAFCA Messages for Engaging Candidates

About WAFCA

Note: While you may not want to share specifics about WAFCA, candidates may not have a strong understanding of the public/private partnership that exists throughout our human services ecosystem. The following can help contextualize our sectors' contributions to the health and well-being of our communities.

WAFCA is a statewide network of non-profit and for-profit providers of mental health and human services. WAFCA members' services include an array of prevention, child welfare, mental health and substance use treatment services across the continuum of care. WAFCA members employ more than 5000 human services professionals across Wisconsin providing critical supports in collaboration with state, county and school partners. Our member providers are critical community connectors and advocates. They engage their community funders and leaders to amplify the work that they do in partnership with the public sector.

Human services providers are key to Wisconsin's economic and social infrastructure. We work with parents to support the formation of lasting bonds with their babies; share strategies and pathways for healing as families recover from trauma; empower youth to discover purpose and hope; and use the power of relationship and connection to help every individual we serve realize their full human potential.

Candidate Questions and Talking Points

PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

WAFCA members serve many individuals who have experienced abuse, neglect, and other forms of trauma; who are living in communities struggling with poverty and violence; and who lack housing and transportation. These individuals are also trying to maintain employment, raise children, and improve their quality of life. Research has shown that with increased investment in prevention services referrals to the child welfare system decline. Early intervention efforts are most effective when integrated with institutions that have direct, early access to children and families. For this reason, investing in early preventions services helps identify and address children and families' needs early on - preventing issues that, if left untreated, can lead to deeper system involvement, family and community disruption and more costly interventions.

- 1. 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?**
- 2. 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?**
- 3. 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?**

STRENGTHEN THE CONTINUUM OF CARE

Over the past decade, our state has lost treatment capacity for serving children, which has resulted in increased utilization of out-of-state placements, a misuse of state resources, and increased risk for children. According to DCF data, more than 400 youth have been placed out of state since 2014, negatively impacting children and resulting in millions in county expenditures. The lack of capacity to provide the right service at the right time has pushed children into hospitals, detention centers, and county offices. Other states are facing intervention from the federal government for failing to appropriately serve children with mental health challenges and intellectual/developmental disabilities. Wisconsin is at risk of similar action. Many services are funded on a fee-for-service structure, which imposes excessive financial risk on providers, leaving agencies financially fragile. Meanwhile, rates of youth mental and behavioral health struggles are on the rise, which further stresses the full continuum of care.

Our continuum of care for children needs state investment to reduce inequities and support timely access to supports. Specifically state expenditures to support sustainable Medicaid rates for providers serving children and parents with disabilities and/or mental health needs are critical. In addition, the state should become a foundational funder for the state's residential treatment network and authorize the addition of a new level of care by approving formation of psychiatric residential treatment facilities (PRTF).

- 1. 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?**
- 2. 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?**
- 3. 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?**

GROWING AND SUPPORTING OUR WORKFORCE

The current health care workforce crisis in Wisconsin is an opportunity to expand career pathways for a wider array of caregivers and helping professions – including community health workers and peers. Behavioral health and human services careers will become more attractive and more competitive as the state continues to adapt to new technology and adopt an operational infrastructure that increases worker satisfaction and reduces burnout and turnover.

- 1. 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 financial barriers to access?**

2. 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?
3. 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?