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16 N. Carroll Street • Suite 600 • Madison, WI 53703 • (608) 284-0580 • FAX (608) 284-0583
1442 N. Farwell • Suite 508 • Milwaukee, WI 53202 • (414) 831-8880 • FAX (414) 298-9127
www.wccf.org



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**Contact: Charity Eleson (608)284-0580 ext 302
Jon Peacock (608)284-0580 ext 307
Martha Cranley (608)284-0580 ext 321**

High Quality Health Care for Children at a Premium
2005 WisKids Count Data Book Highlights Health Outcomes for Kids

Madison - As Wisconsin employers continue to drop private health care insurance coverage, Medicaid and BadgerCare provide an essential safety net that ensures children get critical health care coverage. The 2005 *WisKids Count* Wisconsin Data book released today by the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families reports that though most children have health insurance coverage, the number of uninsured children grew from 85,000 to 91,000 between 2003 and 2004 and barriers remain to achieving high quality care for all children.

Within the health care system itself, substantial gaps in quality exist between the care received through the best health plans and those that provide less comprehensive coverage. Low income children and families and children of color are disproportionately affected by this gap in quality.

In addition, state and federal attempts to “reform” Medicaid programs threaten to erode valuable insurance coverage for very low income and working families. Insufficient prenatal care, poor nutrition, environmental hazards, and barriers to adequate care also conspire to keep many Wisconsin children from enjoying good health.

“Our state’s struggles to keep children and families insured have been front and center in the last several state budgets,” said Charity Eleson, executive director of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families. “Successes in providing access to health care, despite a decline in private employer coverage, are an essential part of making us a healthy state.”

Eleson noted that a recent analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data by the Economic Policy Institute, found that about 355,000 people in Wisconsin have lost employer-provided health insurance over the last four years.

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“Government programs like Medicaid and BadgerCare provide a safety net for our most vulnerable, including those who have lost coverage elsewhere. Maintaining that safety net has been a priority for the state’s Governor and Legislature, and the health of Wisconsin’s residents has benefited because of that commitment,” Elson noted.

While access to health care coverage remains essential for healthy kids, statistics show that health insurance does not guarantee access to quality care. In 2004, 93 percent of Wisconsin children were covered by insurance all year, yet Wisconsin still struggles with the fourth highest infant mortality rate for African American children in the nation. Although paid for under Medicaid’s Health Check program, only 48 percent of children receiving Medicaid in Wisconsin receive the routine lead screening needed to determine whether or not they are at serious health risk of lead poisoning.

Access to health care providers that serve all children continues to be a problem in rural areas, and in most areas of the state essential services like dental and mental health care are difficult to obtain, in particular for low income families. For example, a 2001-2002 survey of third graders found that 31 percent had untreated cavities, including 46 percent in northern Wisconsin and 36 percent in southeastern Wisconsin.

“Rural children still cannot get dental care and the racial disparities in health care outcomes remain substantial. By focusing on outcomes, our health care systems—including those that are publicly funded—have an opportunity to both improve health care delivery and control rising costs by preventing more costly and serious health conditions for children,” Elson said.

Among the recommendations contained in the *WisKids Count* report is a suggestion that the state put more of an emphasis on improving the quality of care, including the development of better systems for both identifying and measuring health care outcomes.

“With health care costs increasing rapidly and employers dropping coverage, it’s becoming increasingly important for both the state and private sector to pay close attention to what we are getting for our health care dollars and how we can design a system that uses those dollars as effectively as possible,” said Jon Peacock, research director for the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families.

“State government can help lead the way by doing a better job of incorporating outcome monitoring and rewards for improving quality into the Medicaid program,” Peacock added.

In conjunction with the release of the *WisKids Count* Book, the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families and the UW Population Health Institute will co-host a Children’s Health Forum, “Producing and Measuring Quality Health Care for At-Risk Kids” on Friday, October 28, from 8am to noon. The event is free and open to the public. People can register on-line at www.wccf.org.

The 2005 *WisKids Count* Data book with county by county data can be found online at(ctrl/click): <http://www.wccf.org/projects/wiskids/2005/2005wiskids.htm>

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