



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Members, Assembly Committee on Health, Aging and Long-Term Care

FROM: Barbara Sella, Executive Director *Barbara Sella*

DATE: April 12, 2023

RE: Assembly Bill 148 BadgerCare Plus Continuing Eligibility

On behalf of the Catholic bishops of Wisconsin, we respectfully urge you to oppose Assembly Bill 148, which limits access to health care, especially for those who most need it.

Public assistance programs exist to aid vulnerable individuals and families whose situation prevents them from being able to meet basic needs. Frequently, those who most need Medicaid benefits are facing a myriad of challenges, some of which may be lifelong. Addiction, trauma, illness, accidents, and the loss of family, housing, or employment can all stymie efforts to build stability. The goal of these public assistance programs is to accompany vulnerable individuals so they can move out of poverty.

Health care is a basic human right and access to health care for all has been a policy goal of the U.S. bishops since 1919. It is important to remember that those who currently receive Medicaid are individuals who have disabilities, are pregnant, with chronic conditions or diseases, children and their parents, and individuals living in poverty. By definition, they are in need of services and do not have the resources necessary to receive treatment and medications without Medicaid. These are individuals and families who are likely struggling to meet home and transportation expenses, as well as meeting the basic needs of their loved ones. They frequently must transition from one home to another, as well as from one employment situation to another, changing addresses, phone numbers, and earnings along the way.

AB 148 would require that the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) determine an individual's eligibility every six months. Currently, most Medicaid recipients must complete a program renewal at least once a year to determine ongoing program eligibility. While renewal is necessary and important, a six-month renewal will be burdensome on the state and individuals, and likely result in individuals not having access to care when they most need it. The requirement will lead to missed deadlines, appointments, treatments, and medications, rather than a meaningful path towards self-improvement. Many may not even realize that their coverage has lapsed until care is needed.

The bill also states that a failure to disclose information in a timely manner can result in a six-month suspension from the Medicaid program. We think this is draconian. It does not distinguish between a person who makes an innocent mistake and one who knowingly withholds information.

Finally, it is important to note the impact this bill will have on private charitable actors. Depriving the poorest among us of health care will only shift the burden to the hundreds of private charities, Catholic and other, which are already overwhelmed. While as Catholics we stand ready to serve the common good, we cannot be expected to serve more with less.

In conclusion, reforming public assistance programs to reduce poverty and dependency requires the involvement of government and the private sector working cooperatively. Reforms must ensure that people in poverty do not become targets, but rather that they receive the support and services appropriate to their needs. Self-sufficiency and self-determination require that those in poverty be listened to and respectfully engaged. Overly bureaucratic and punitive measures to reduce fraud and encourage responsibility all too often have the opposite effect of increasing burdens and further impoverishing the most vulnerable. The problem of poverty requires a holistic approach, something that our Catholic Charities agencies and Society of St. Vincent de Paul councils are adept at doing. Everyone has an interest in improving health and encouraging labor force participation. We urge you not to tie the hands of our state's most vulnerable individuals, but instead to work together to improve the health of all of Wisconsin's residents.

For all these reasons, we urge you to oppose this bill. Thank you.