



Family Stories: Birth Cost Equity for Unmarried Women & Families - May 2020

ABC for Health, Inc.

May 2020

The Wisconsin Minority Health Program provides ABC for Health essential support to help reduce avoidable health disparities for unmarried, pregnant women across Wisconsin, with a particular focus in Dane and Milwaukee Counties. Our approach is to identify families in need, collect and share family stories, and conduct education and outreach on the issue of Birth Cost Recovery (BCR), the collection of Medicaid-supported birth expenses, unique to unmarried couples. Unfortunately, Wisconsin leads the nation in BCR, a policy we call the “Birth Tax,” causing stress and potentially more serious consequences to predominantly low-income and minority pregnant women and their families.

May 2020 Update:

This Update includes *some* good news! A Resolution to abolish the Birth Tax was before the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisor’s Health and Human Needs Committee in mid- May. The Committee adopted the resolution, which meant they agreed that the Milwaukee County Department of Child Support Services should discontinue the practice of pursuing birth cost recovery collections.



The Resolution was then presented to the full County Board for a vote on May 28, with the recommendation of adoption from the Health and Human Needs committee. Unfortunately, Supervisor Czarnecki, the first to speak on the Resolution, made a motion to refer the issue back to a Committee—he suggested the Committee on Finance—to review the fiscal impact of eliminating the Birth Tax on Milwaukee County. Supervisor Clancy disagreed with this. He said “the very concept of Birth Cost Recovery seems flawed.” He continued, “Unfortunately, some of that conversation focused on money going to child support and sent to BadgerCare.” He clarified that both are good programs, but that Birth Cost Recovery “shouldn’t be how child support is paid for.” He repeated, “Birth Cost Recovery is flawed,” and he urged the Board to not send the resolution to the Committee on Finance. After additional short discussions, the motion to refer to Committee was approved 12-6 and the issue was no longer discussed. Unfortunately, in preparation for their June meeting, Chairman Haas of the Finance Committee failed to add the Birth Cost Recovery Resolution to his meeting agenda. Which means the issue will sit dormant for most of the summer.

ABC for Health created informational materials that stressed that, in the interest of racial and social justice, Milwaukee County must eliminate this discriminatory practice. The policy only applies if a pregnant women is enrolled in BadgerCare Plus and is not married to the child’s father. Data available shows that 78% of Medicaid births in Milwaukee County were to unmarried mothers - 77% were black, and only 22% were white. This policy is harming Milwaukee’s ability to address systemic racism, reduce black infant mortality, and lift families out of poverty.

We linked to our [informational sheet](#) on the Birth Tax and its impact on Milwaukee County in our correspondence and Partner’s Updates. We have compiled our research and writing on our [Birth Tax website](#). We will encourage the Finance Committee Chair to add the resolution to his July meeting agenda, and continue to inform and education on the importance of this issue.



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About ABC for Health

ABC for Health is a Wisconsin-based nonprofit public interest law firm dedicated to linking children and families, particularly those with special health care needs, to health care benefits and services.

ABC for Health's mission is to provide information, advocacy tools, legal services, and expert support needed to obtain, maintain, and finance health care coverage services.

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Responsive Trainings in a Challenging Time

We were motivated by our momentum on the Birth Tax heading into March 2020, after a successful HealthWatch Wisconsin Conference and interest from community partners in our educational materials and webinars on the Birth Tax.

By the middle of March, however, the COVID-19 pandemic dominated not only the calls coming into ABC for Health, but also the substance of our online trainings. We quickly transitioned our video production to national emergency topics, creating both a [COVID Playlist](#) and a [COVID Resources](#) page.

We continued our COVID trainings into the second quarter, as Wisconsin's Department of Health Services received state and federal approval for additional program changes, many of which impact minority health and communities. The state made temporary changes to BadgerCare and Medicaid program eligibility, renewals, and premiums, as well as private insurance changes, especially for those directly impacted by the virus. But the rules are confusing, each with different effective dates, evolving guidance from the federal government on service coverage, and end dates. We focused our training content on those issues most relevant to vulnerable populations, with a direct focus on how to connect to basic needs—food, energy, housing, telecommunications and internet, and social supports, in addition to health coverage.

In fact, in just March and April, we produced 50 COVID related videos and posted them to our YouTube Channel. They were viewed over 100,000 times. Our most popular videos targeted the lowest income consumers in our State—those on SSI, SSDI, or those with no current household income. We feel confident we reached individuals in need.

Looking ahead, we will begin planning for the education and training we can do for the transition when the public health emergency ends, when things return to "normal." Rules will revert, and coverage transitions will occur even if jobs do not return. We want to be ready to help.

Already 2020 has been a busy, challenging year, and we're not even half way through. Still, we remain hopeful. With big challenge frequently comes big change, and even big reward. We have already instituted new workflows, built new efficiencies, and touched families when they needed us most.

At the end of May, a family sent a note to our office after working with one of our advocates that read, "You truly are a guardian angel. We would be lost without your help and patience. Just hearing your kind and caring voice in some of our darkest moments made us feel that we would be ok and get through these times. We are forever grateful."

