



Lifting Children Up: 2026 State Policy and Advocacy Priorities Recap

At Children's Hospital Colorado, advocacy is a core part of our hospital's mission to improve the health of children. We work alongside our clinicians and team members, patients and families, community partners and lawmakers to champion public policies and funding to create better child health opportunities and outcomes. This legislative session, we urged policymakers to keep the unique health needs of Colorado kids top of mind as they navigated a \$1 billion budget shortfall. These fiscal challenges unfortunately did prompt cuts to crucial child health programs. Despite these obstacles, we were proud to continue to be the voice for kids. For the remainder of the year, the Children's Colorado government affairs team will turn our attention to policy implementation efforts and long-term strategic planning as the state prepares to elect a new governor this fall.



Children's Hospital Colorado
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By the numbers: 2026 Colorado state legislative session



162 Bills monitored across Children's Colorado's 2026 policy and advocacy priorities and beyond



Over 1,000 Messages from grassroots advocates sent to lawmakers on child health priorities including access to immunizations and accessible, affordable and safe housing for Colorado children and families



25 Amendments secured to improve legislation ensuring the unique needs of children were prioritized by state policymakers



360 People trained in advocacy through events like Youth Mental Health Action Day, which brought nearly 200 providers and child health advocates to the Capitol, and the inaugural Child Health Changemaker cohort, which provided advocacy leadership training for 21 team leaders from across our system of care



19 Experts testified in committee hearings on issues including defending access to pediatric primary care, protecting kids online, ensuring access to compounded medications for kids and increasing the availability of emergency medical services



9 Media stories on advocacy priorities in local and statewide publications, highlighting pediatric issues ranging from medical education workforce investments in the state budget to supporting local youth tobacco prevention measures

Preserving access to care for kids amid budget challenges

Nearly half a million Colorado kids rely on Medicaid coverage. Protecting and strengthening investments in pediatric healthcare is essential to ensure kids can access the care they need. As Medicaid now accounts for roughly one third of the state budget, state lawmakers focused on budget decisions to address Medicaid cost growth amid the massive budget shortfall. Children's Colorado worked alongside partners to help protect and preserve child health priorities in the budget, successfully advocating with lawmakers to reconsider initial proposals that would have resulted in deeper cuts and reductions impacting Colorado kids and families.

 The final cuts that state lawmakers approved included:

- A 2% across-the-board provider rate cut
- Targeted specialty physician rate cuts
- Enrollment caps on the Cover all Coloradans program for undocumented children and pregnant women
- Local public health department cuts
- Reductions to the Early Intervention program for children with developmental delays

- ✔ Children's Colorado successfully defended key state budget priorities to support access to care, sustaining coverage of lifesaving specialty drugs, preserving a program to support pediatric primary care practices and protecting mental health services for kids with complex needs.
- ✔ We also supported **House Bill 1430** to help mitigate the effects of a proposed ballot measure that could further worsen child health cuts in the state budget by mandating additional state funding for road projects.
- ✔ We secured improvements to **House Bill 1328** related to transparency and improvements to non-emergent medical transportation for next-day and urgent appointments for Medicaid members and increased funds the state receives from the federal government to cover more of the costs for transportation.

Supporting a strong pediatric workforce

As a teaching hospital, Children's Colorado cares deeply about training the next generation of pediatric healthcare professionals. The pediatric healthcare workforce is the critical foundation of the specialized healthcare that children deserve.

✔ Children's Colorado played a key role in successfully protecting against a proposed 80% cut to indirect medical education funding that supports physician residency training programs in Colorado.

✘ We also submitted a petition to the U.S. Department of Education, signed by our leadership team and over 1,000 team members, to encourage the withdrawal of a proposed rule to change loan repayment and eligibility for critical advanced practice nurses, physician assistants, occupational therapists, social workers, physical therapists and other critical master's-level trained health professionals. Unfortunately, the agency recently finalized this rule, but Children's Colorado will continue to track implementation that is set to begin in July and explore future advocacy efforts on this important workforce issue.

Promoting children's mental health and well-being

This session we continued to push conversations and policies forward that will meaningfully address the child and youth mental health crisis in Colorado.

✔ We supported **House Bill 1002**, which will require commercial health insurers to reimburse pre-licensed mental health providers practicing under the supervision of a licensed clinician, streamline credentialing processes that private insurers require mental health providers to complete when joining their network, and mandate accurate, up-to-date provider availability directories.

✔ We worked with healthcare partners to shape amendments to **House Bill 1195** governing the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in mental health, in order to balance patient access and consent, while ensuring that future technologies approved by federal authorities for use in mental health treatment remain available in Colorado.

✔ As more youth are interacting with AI chatbots, we worked to improve and advocate for **House Bill 1263**, which sets minimum standards for AI chatbot companies including requiring the companies to adopt protocols for responding to users expressing suicidal ideation or self-harm and connecting them to appropriate crisis services, allowing youth to safely engage with these tools without facing serious risk of harm or exploitation.

✔ Additionally, Children's Colorado worked with state lawmakers to include a request for information for several state agencies in the state budget bill that will identify and publicly report deidentified and aggregated infant and early childhood mental health data to help inform future policy decisions.

In partnership with Healthier Colorado and nearly 70 organizations across the state, we helped launch **Mind Our Future Colorado**, a nonpartisan initiative focused on making the child and youth mental health crisis in Colorado a leading priority for action in the election for the state's new governor. This critical initiative will continue to put child and youth mental health at the forefront of candidates' and voters' minds, continuing through the election this fall and building a long-term coalition committed to implementing real solutions to address the youth mental health crisis. So far, Mind Our Future Colorado has:

- Built a strong, statewide coalition of nearly 70 organizations
- Held 14 in-person and virtual roundtables with over 100 youth, families, educators, community leaders, nonprofits and mental health providers across rural and urban Colorado to better understand the diverse needs and opportunities, and to inform a collective vision for moving forward
- Developed a policy playbook to inform the next governor on actionable strategies for child and youth mental health
- Supported local and statewide media stories emphasizing the importance of addressing the youth mental health crisis for the next governor
- Hosted a nonpartisan candidate forum with major media partners to hear directly from the gubernatorial candidates about how they plan to prioritize child and youth mental health if elected

+ Improving child health outcomes through prevention

Policy solutions that are focused on fostering safe, supportive environments where children live, learn and play can help keep more Colorado kids from ever needing a hospital, and this session we worked on a variety of issues aimed at strategies to improve child health.

- ✔ Vaccination is one of the most effective ways to keep children healthy and protect them from serious diseases. We championed **Senate Bill 32** to maintain access and coverage to vaccines for children and their families. The bill allows Colorado's state departments to rely on trusted evidence-based guidelines from health professional organizations and protect providers who administer vaccines.
- ✔ We advocated for **Senate Bill 26**, which is a common sense measure to ensure that Colorado's child passenger safety laws and requirements apply uniformly to larger vehicles in the state, and we supported **House Bill 1318** which strengthened traffic safety near schools, ensuring Colorado kids have safe routes to school.

- ✔ We successfully advocated to defeat **Senate Bill 164**, which would have allowed a massive expansion of marijuana-derived beverages to be sold in places where children are present, including grocery stores, restaurants, convenience stores, and more.
- ✔ On a local level, we also advocated as part of a coalition for Aurora City Council to pass a **local tobacco retailer license** ordinance. These types of ordinances are an evidence-based method to ensure that youth access to tobacco and nicotine products is reduced, that retailers are enforcing age restriction policies and that retailers are held accountable.

Children's Colorado will remain a steadfast champion for healthy kids and communities by working toward solutions in partnership with our clinicians, team members and community partners. We invite you to partner with us to continue to make child health a priority for our policymakers and for our communities.

Make a difference as a Child Health Champion



Join our Child Health Champions advocacy network to quickly and easily advocate for kids' health.

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