

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Note to editors/reporters: Wisconsin Hospital Association Vice President of Workforce and Clinical Practice Ann Zenk is available for interviews on the workforce report referenced in this release.

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COVID-19 Accelerated Wisconsin's Health Care Workforce Challenges

WHA Health Care Report details increasing demands on worker pool

Madison, Wis., March 17, 2021—COVID-19 acted as an accelerant to long-standing trends challenging the state's health care workforce, according to the [Wisconsin Hospital Association's \(WHA's\) 2020 Health Care Workforce Report](#).

"Hospitals and health systems stepped up to fight a protracted surge of COVID-infected patients requiring complex care while also continuing to deliver babies, attend to accident victims and treat chronic diseases," WHA's 17th annual industry workforce report notes, crediting Wisconsin's health care professionals for resilience and creativity in the face of an indiscriminate global pandemic that has claimed more than 6,000 lives and sickened hundreds of thousands of people across the state. The report also details the physical, mental and emotional toll that the prolonged stress of the pandemic has taken on Wisconsin's overburdened health care workforce.

Included in WHA's 2020 Health Care Workforce report is a detailed analysis of the pipeline of workers in a broad range of health care subspecialties. Entry-level positions like nursing assistants, practical nurses and technicians registered some of the highest vacancy rates. Advanced practice clinicians also saw high vacancy levels. COVID-19, the report notes, magnified the impact of these shortages.

"This year's report shows the continued impact of an aging population on the state's health care workforce. This, combined with the overwhelming effects of a global pandemic, creates an urgency for solutions to maintain the resilient workforce needed to sustain Wisconsin's high-quality health care," said WHA President and CEO Eric Borgerding. "Wisconsin's health care quality isn't just happenstance. It requires a dedicated and skilled workforce, smart use of technology and regulatory and licensing reforms that help us make the best and safest use of both."

WHA's 2020 Health Care Workforce Report breaks down the workforce supply and demand equation and draws attention to an increasing need for health care services by an aging population. Unfortunately, this same demographic trend increases the risk of a disproportionate number of retirements among health care workers relative to new professionals entering the field. This dual pressure on the state's health care workforce has a name reflective of the concern it is creating within the industry: the "Silver Tsunami."

While the full effect of COVID-19 on the health care workforce in Wisconsin cannot yet be fully assessed, the report highlights historic trends as well as pandemic-fueled adaptations driving change in health care planning and delivery, including new technologies and workforce innovations that increase the capacity of the state's current health care workers. It also argues for removing regulatory barriers that impede care delivery and promotes regulatory flexibility to optimize the available workforce.

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“Wisconsin’s health care workforce must grow, but with a shrinking supply of workers, it cannot grow fast enough to keep up with rapidly increasing demand,” noted Ann Zenk, WHA Senior Vice President of Workforce and Clinical Practice. “COVID-19 magnified the need for Wisconsin to carefully target growth to the professions most in demand, and to use those professionals to the full extent of their education, training and experience. We must also provide the health care workforce with technology tailored to clinical need, not weighed down by regulatory requirements.”

Based upon the report’s findings, WHA recommends that health care organizations, educators and policy makers pursue the following strategies to support the state’s health care workforce and sustain the excellent health care Wisconsin is known for:

- Build public-private partnerships to “Grow Our Own” Wisconsin health care workforce.
- Break down barriers to top-of-skill practice.
- Bolster acceptance and utilization of telemedicine and technology.
- Reduce regulatory burden and increase regulatory flexibility.
- Support care in the best setting—inpatient, outpatient or post-acute.

WHA also recommends taking stock of the state’s public health infrastructure shortcomings in preparation for the inevitable next global health emergency.

Download the full Wisconsin 2020 Health Care Workforce Report [here](#).

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The Wisconsin Hospital Association (WHA) advocates on behalf of its 130-plus member hospitals and health systems to enable the delivery of high-quality, high-value care to the citizens of Wisconsin. Learn more at wha.org.