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August 18, 2021

Secretary Dawn B. Crim
State of Wisconsin
Department of Safety and Professional Services
4822 Madison Yards Way
Madison, WI 53705

Re: Urgent Request for Workforce Assistance

Dear Secretary Crim:

The Wisconsin Hospital Association (WHA), and our more than 135 member hospitals and health systems, are writing to alert you to health care workforce shortages that are increasing in intensity, and to request DSPS assistance in actively working to resolve any delay in licensure for health care professionals willing, able and very ready to work in Wisconsin.

For over a year, Wisconsin's hospitals and health systems have been the front line in the most significant public health crisis in over three generations. Hospitals and health systems have been increasingly busy helping patients, families and communities catch up on health care deferred during the initial months of the pandemic, and now are also becoming busy again caring for COVID-19 patients as the Delta variant threatens the State with another surge of hospitalizations.

Finding and retaining an adequate workforce has been increasingly difficult for Wisconsin hospitals. A new phenomenon arising out of the COVID-19 pandemic has been a drastic increase in the utilization of agency staff to fill nursing, respiratory therapy, surgical tech and other workforce positions for which employers are unable to fill via their hiring and recruitment efforts. Pre-COVID agency use was not a common occurrence in Wisconsin; our state was fortunate that our health care workforce, including our nursing workforce, was weathering the Silver Tsunami well. Less than half of the hospitals in the state reported contract staffing utilization for fiscal year 2019. That is no longer the case.

Late last week WHA asked our members about their agency staffing. Eighty-one hospitals quickly responded, 77 indicating they are utilizing agency staff for workforce gaps but with increasing difficulty. Three of the four hospitals that are not utilizing agency staff reported they were seeking agency staffing and unable to secure. Only one hospital reported not having to utilize agency staffing. As COVID-19 again surges across the country, demand for agency staffing is also increasing and even this temporary solution is becoming more difficult.

The rapid increase in agency utilization and the dearth of applications for open positions creates an even greater focus on the importance of effective and efficient licensing processes. Two-thirds of the responding hospitals also reported licensure delays impacting workforce availability. WHA and our members know this is a multi-faceted issue that can be due to applicant errors or missing information, licensing board review or agency processing delays. The additional work and changed work environment imposed by COVID-19 also exacerbates the situation.

WHA members are working with health care professionals they hire to assist with ensuring as clean and complete an application as possible. There is an urgent need, though, to process licenses more rapidly, and make those hired by Wisconsin hospitals and health systems more immediately available to work. Our request of DSPTS is to prioritize processing of health care licenses and to ask staff to proactively seek out missing information to complete licensure processing.

Current processes rely on DSPTS staff logging received information into the DSPTS Application Status query as they are able, and this is the passive notification applicants receive that information is missing from their application. The process is a passive process for DSPTS staff also. There is no “alert” when the applicant provides updated information to DSPTS; the process relies on DSPTS staff getting to it when they look at that application again.

COVID-19 is again surging, hospital beds filling and inpatient and ICU capacity shrinking. Our dedicated workforce is already stretched very thin, and we need to work together to leverage all available resources and strategies to assure access to care. We ask you re-deploy staff and resources to review for and reach out to pending health care applicants with missing information until this information has been obtained and a license has been granted.

We understand this request is a stopgap measure, but with demand for care increasing and workforce shortages worsening, we feel urgent action is necessary.

We welcome the opportunity of working beside DSPTS, as we have on other issues, to assist in any way with this and other short-term strategies and to provide WHA and our members’ support to long-term solutions.

Sincerely,



Eric Borgerding
President & CEO

cc: Karen Timberlake, DHS Secretary-designee