

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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Wisconsin's Health Care Workforce Reached Tipping Point in 2021

"The nursing shortage has arrived."

Madison, Wis., March 16, 2022—An aging workforce combined with a spike in worker departures associated with nationwide employment disruption dubbed the "Great Resignation" created unprecedented levels of vacancy rates in health care professions in 2021, according to the [Wisconsin Hospital Association's \(WHA's\) 2022 Health Care Workforce Report](#).

Increasing pressure on the state's health care workforce driven by retirements within health care fields at the same time demand for health care by an aging population is rising—a trend referred to as the "Silver Tsunami"—has long been cited in WHA's annual Health Care Workforce Report as a cause for concern as the state seeks to maximize worker availability, longevity and success within the industry. Burnout among health care workers resulting from successive surges of COVID-19 cases over the past two years and escalating demand for delayed health care services has intensified a growing health care workforce shortage in the state.

Added to the stress placed upon hospital staff as they responded to unprecedented demand for health care services in 2021 driven by COVID-19 and pent-up demand for delayed care were pressures to fill gaps in the state's public health response and to accommodate systemic failures in the continuum of care. Hospital and health system staff were called upon to educate their communities about COVID-19 spread and ways to avoid infection, administer COVID-19 vaccines and conduct COVID-19 testing. And as they creatively adapted their physical spaces to treat COVID and non-COVID patients alike, their capacity to do so was challenged by an inability of nursing homes to accept patients no longer requiring hospital-level care. At one point in 2021, WHA estimates that 600 patients were occupying hospital beds in Wisconsin awaiting admission to a nursing home or other long-term care facility.

The combination of the Silver Tsunami, the Great Resignation and a persistent pandemic that pushed hospital occupancy to its limit resulted in an increase in vacancies in 13 of 17 professions tracked in WHA's Health Care Workforce Report, with seven positions registering double-digit vacancy rates. Registered nurse vacancy rates were the highest they've been since 2005, leading WHA to note, "The nursing shortage has arrived."

Vacancy rates, according to the report, are highest for frontline clinical and technical staff and lower in professions with a longer runway to practice, apart from occupational and physical therapists, where vacancy rates rose sharply.

WHA Senior Vice President of Workforce and Clinical Practice Ann Zenk observed, "Our health care workforce has shouldered an enormous professional, mental and emotional burden over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. They are understandably drained. They have cared for us through extremely challenging circumstances and at a time when their own ranks were depleted by illness and burnout. Wisconsin's health care workers now more than ever deserve our understanding and commitment as we together seek to fill gaps between workforce supply and demand in order to maintain our state's high-quality care."

“Addressing the health care workforce shortage that has been building in Wisconsin and which has been exacerbated by COVID-19 will require a concerted and sustained strategy involving health care organizations, educators and policy makers that encourages, supports and advances health care workers in their pursuit of fulfilling and meaningful careers,” said WHA President and CEO Eric Borgerding in response to the 2022 Health Care Workforce Report data.

As the state’s health care industry seeks to attract new workers and build new capacity from within, it must also adapt to the expectations of a new, younger workforce, WHA notes, recommending collaboration among health care stakeholders in support of organizational, public and payer policies that achieve the following:

- Build public-private partnerships to “Grow Our Own” Wisconsin health care workforce;
- Promote rapid innovations to retain and recruit workers to Wisconsin’s health care workforce;
- Break down barriers to top-of-skill practice;
- Further bolster acceptance and efficient utilization of telemedicine and technology;
- Reduce regulatory burden and increase regulatory flexibility; and,
- Support care in the best setting—inpatient, outpatient or post-acute.

Preparation for the inevitable next global health emergency demands that the state also take stock of its public health infrastructure and address payer practices that impede efficient and effective health care delivery.

Download the full Wisconsin 2022 Health Care Workforce Report [here](#).

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