

Encourage Wisconsin Graduates to Pursue a Career in Health Care

By Ann Zenk, WHA Senior Vice President of Workforce and Clinical Practice

This time each year marks a season of celebration, as soon-to-be-graduates finish out their final courses and prepare to embark on their new careers. This time of year also marks National Hospital Week, a time to commemorate the care provided by the healthcare teams in Wisconsin hospitals who are leading the way in quality and value, and serve a vital safety-net role in our communities.

These May observances highlight our nation's workforce and the way in which younger generations continually shape its future. They also offer an opportunity to recognize the role hospitals and health systems – including their current and future workforce – will play as Wisconsin and the nation undergo pivotal demographic shifts.

The [Wisconsin Hospital Association's 2024 Healthcare Workforce Report](#) shed light on the workforce challenges facing our state's hospitals. Job vacancy rates surged in 2021 and 2022 and remain in double digits for 8 of 18 health care professions. In particular, Wisconsin's nursing workforce is not growing rapidly enough to keep pace with rising demand. Adding pressure to the need for our workforce to expand is the reality that a quarter of Wisconsinites are at retirement age. This creates a dual challenge we refer to as the "Silver Tsunami" – the aging population requires more health care, yet leaves open more job vacancies than younger generations are filling. As the last of the large Baby Boomer generation reaches age 65 in 2030, the workforce storm will ease for other industries, but demand for health care will continue to surge for decades to come.

While this dynamic rightfully sounds some alarm bells, WHA's 2024 Workforce Report also offers a blueprint for the future. Our state's fine educational institutions are joining their hospital partners to further strengthen clear, accessible and satisfying career pathways within the healthcare industry. In-demand roles on healthcare teams are accessible, achievable and rewarding, offering a wealth of options to students at all levels.

To make clear the opportunities – especially to middle and high school students – the WHA Foundation recently launched a hospital career exploration website and statewide digital ad campaign. Titled [So Many Options](#), the campaign features individuals working in hospitals across Wisconsin, showcasing the wide variety of career opportunities the healthcare field offers. Roles on hospital teams go beyond the clinical, extending into business, technology, management, research, and more.

Wisconsin's efforts to bolster its health care workforce do not stop there. Across the state, from local hospitals to our state capitol, initiatives are springing up, aimed at meeting increased demand with a shrinking available workforce. The Governor's Council on Workforce Investment and the newly created Task Force on Health Care Workforce are fostering discussions to not just sustain, but improve upon Wisconsin's nation-leading role in workforce development.

The foundational work being done by hospitals and health systems to grow, support, protect and retain their employees is a resource that these groups are wisely relying on. The introduction of the nation's first registered nurse apprenticeship program is a prime example of the type of innovative, bold and potentially game-changing ideas that should be pursued.



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Members of the legislature have also invested state resources to bolster physician, nurse, and allied health professional training programs in the last state budget, all of which were also supported by Gov. Evers. Regardless of the outcome of the next election, continuing policies that expand our healthcare workforce will be critical. Unfortunately, most of our workforce challenges are not a quick fix but if we make the right decisions now, we can maintain a competitive edge for generations to come.

As we welcome spring and prepare to celebrate the graduates in our lives, let's also use National Hospital Week as a reminder of the centrality of hospitals to our communities and the importance of a thriving healthcare workforce. This is a moment to reflect not only on the challenges, but the immense opportunities that lie ahead for health care and hospital careers in Wisconsin.

Encourage the graduates in your lives to pursue a rewarding career in a Wisconsin hospital. Coming from someone with more than four decades of health care experience, I can promise you they won't regret it.

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