

Panel Discussion Tops Meeting of Governor's Health Care Workforce Task Force

Leaders in education and health care, including WHA Senior Vice President of Workforce and Clinical Practice Ann Zenk, were on the top of the agenda for the third meeting of the Governor's Task Force on Health Care Workforce, May 9, 2024, in La Crosse. Zenk joined two task force members for a panel discussion on recruitment and retention challenges and solutions.

Heather Schimmers, Gundersen Health System president, and Dr. Thomas Kernozek, UW-La Crosse Department of Health Professions chair, along with Zenk, shared their expertise and experience with the Governor's Task Force in a wide-ranging discussion. As Zenk noted, "It's not just about growing the workforce faster, although we must do that. We must also make sure our health care teams can work to the top of their capabilities, supported by technology and protected and relieved from regulatory burden."



Ann Zenk and Heather Schimmers

Schimmers discussed Gundersen's approach to assessing their workforce, identifying priority areas and then rapidly implementing actions to address them, including reducing vacancy rates in nursing roles by nearly half. Schimmers said, "We are building a culture, a workplace, and health care teams we are very proud of, and that takes time, effort and investment," adding, "That's not easy to do on razor-thin margins."

Dr. Kernozek shared how the community, La Crosse area students and colleges, and health care employers benefit from the collaborative approach the region takes. This collaborative approach, Kernozek notes, increases career path awareness and opportunities for students. Kernozek also identified one of the biggest bottlenecks schools and students encounter in expanding school programs to their fullest potential: clinical placement opportunities. Zenk acknowledged the challenge and the opportunity "Grow Our Own" grant dollars provide to grow clinical training opportunities for Wisconsin students, urging the committee to include this proven solution in their recommendations to the Governor.

Zenk, Schimmers and Kernozek also discussed another bottleneck: the pool of nurses that meet the current qualifications to teach nursing students. Kernozek noted the competition for master's prepared nurses, who can serve as faculty or seek higher-paying jobs as advanced practice clinicians. Schimmers noted that as a registered nurse with decades of experience and a master's degree she could not be a nursing instructor. Zenk provided a suggestion that nursing education, like health care, must not only grow their workforce faster but also utilize the available workforce to the top of their capabilities, and perhaps the largest portion of the nursing workforce, bachelor's prepared registered nurses, could have an expanded role in educating the future nursing workforce.

The Governor's Task Force on Health Care Workforce is chaired by Lieutenant Governor Sara Rodriguez and co-chaired by Wisconsin Department of Health Services Secretary-Designee Kirsten Johnson and Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development Secretary-Designee Amy Pechacek.

The inclusion of hospital and health system data, expertise and experience in the task force work is ensured by the presence of a strong and diverse group of WHA member leaders. The Governor's Task Force on Health Care Workforce includes six leaders from WHA member hospitals and health systems:

- Kelly Buchholtz, chief nursing officer, Mayo Clinic Health System NW Wisconsin
- Sharon Cox, vice president/chief nursing officer, Beloit Health System;
- Eric Humphrey, chief human resources officer, Froedert ThedaCare Health;
- Shawn Lerch, chief executive officer, Sauk Prairie Healthcare;
- Heather Schimmers, president, Gundersen Health System; and
- Robyn Woolever, director of Integrated Care Services, Children's Wisconsin.

You can reach out to WHA's [Ann Zenk](#) with questions or feedback about the Governor's Task Force or about any other workforce issue.

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