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Wisconsin's Health Care Workforce Faces Ongoing Strain as Demand for Care Remains High

WHA report calls for immediate action to expand workforce pathways and reduce barriers

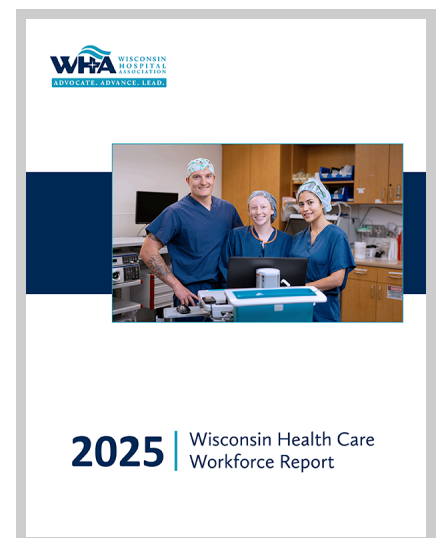
WHA released its annual Wisconsin Health Care Workforce Report on March 31, highlighting persistently high vacancy rates despite growing hospital employment.

"Wisconsin hospitals are beginning to gain traction in filling job postings but remain challenged by a factor that is mostly immovable: the state's changing demographics that are shrinking the available workforce and at the same time increasing health care demand," said WHA Senior Vice President of Workforce and Clinical Practice Ann Zenk.

Nationwide, 10,000 members of the Baby Boom generation reach the age of 65 daily. The wave of retirements among Baby Boomers, often referred to as the "Silver Tsunami," is putting added strain on the workforce in every industry. However, the challenge is doubled for hospitals and health systems. Wisconsin citizens older than 65 make up 18% of the state's population but account for 38% of the health care visits to Wisconsin hospitals and their outpatient settings. The last baby boomer will turn 65 in 2030. The surge in retirements will taper off but the increased health care needs of an aging population will persist for decades to come.

While the health care industry faces unique workforce and demand challenges, it also has a distinct advantage: easily identifiable and accessible career pathways. Employer-sponsored programs like health care apprenticeships and "Grow Our Own" matching grants wisely invest in these career pathways and create public-private partnerships that expand physician, allied health, registered nurse and advanced practice clinician training opportunities for those wishing to enter a hospital career.

These efforts are growing Wisconsin's health care workforce, but not fast enough. The report notes that although current vacancy rates have declined from the historic highs of 2021 and 2022,



they remain significantly higher than those seen in 2009 for nursing, frontline technical and entry-level positions. Last year's report noted an overall vacancy rate of 10 percent, with double-digit vacancies in 8 of 18 professions. The 2025 report shows vacancies have improved slightly to 9 percent, yet a third of the tracked professions still report double-digit vacancy rates. The report notes there are signs of improvement emerging with job opening rates coming down in 15 of 18 professions.

To meet this increased demand, especially with Wisconsin and the nation in the midst of a sustained nursing shortage, WHA points to the importance of health care teams and models of care to support each team member working together at the top of their skill level. WHA's report recommends educators consider adopting a similar approach for nursing education by expanding the role of experienced bachelor's-prepared registered nurses to increase nursing school capacity and alleviate workforce pressures on current faculty.

Reducing unnecessary burdens and inefficiencies can help maximize the existing workforce's capacity without relying solely on new hires. WHA's annual workforce report illustrates the documentation burden on physicians and health care teams—driven by regulatory and payer demands—is increasing. In addition, well-designed licensure processes can still delay start dates for health care professionals when demand is high, such as during graduation season or when Wisconsin's more than 100,000 nurses apply for license renewal every two years.

"Wisconsin's health care workforce challenges extend beyond hospitals—they impact the entire state. To keep pace with rising health care demands, we need to take immediate and sustained action to minimize barriers, foster innovation and support the development of a strong and sustainable workforce," said WHA President and CEO Eric Borgerding. "Addressing these issues requires a collaborative effort from all stakeholders—policymakers, educators and health care leaders alike."

The report urges policymakers, educators, employers and all health care professions to take action to:

- Create, expand and support accessible and attainable educational and occupational pathways to attract new entrants to the health care workforce;
- Break down administrative and regulatory barriers to entering and remaining in Wisconsin's health care workforce; and,
- Encourage wise and innovative use of technology that benefits both patients and the health care workforce.

For more specific recommendations, read WHA's 2025 Workforce Report [here](#).