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President's Column: More Than Health Care: Why Our Communities Need Strong Hospitals

By Eric Borgerding, President and CEO, WHA

Hospitals have always been more than just buildings where medical care is provided. They are vital pillars of stability, compassion and trust within our communities. This week, during National Hospital Week, we celebrate these invaluable institutions and the dedicated professionals who work tirelessly to care for our neighbors, friends and families.

Hospitals serve as a safety net, ensuring that no matter the time of day or the nature of the emergency, patients can count on receiving the care they need. They are the providers of life-saving medical interventions, preventable care programs and mental health services, all of which are critical to maintaining healthy and thriving communities. Hospitals go beyond providing health care—they're among the largest employers in many of our communities, support local schools and job training programs, respond in times of crisis and partner with local businesses to boost regional economies. From food service to information technology, their reach touches nearly every sector.

But these institutions face mounting challenges. From government underfunding to difficulties in recruiting and retaining health care workers, hospitals must shoulder countless pressures while continuing to care for those who rely on them.

Despite their essential role, many hospitals are struggling to keep their doors open. Wisconsin hospitals, for example, shouldered \$1.6 billion in unreimbursed costs in 2023 alone due to Wisconsin BadgerCare (Medicaid) underpayments, which cover only about 63% of care expenses. This underfunding can lead to closures, particularly in rural areas, stripping communities not only of nearby medical services but also of jobs, emergency preparedness infrastructure and economic vitality.

Beyond funding, staffing remains a critical challenge. Hospitals are facing significant workforce shortages that are only expected to grow in the coming years. Without legislative action and strategic investments to grow and protect the health care workforce, the strain on hospitals and their ability to meet the needs of patients will continue to deepen.

Supporting hospitals begins with strong advocacy. This year's Advocacy Day, held in Madison, showcased record turnout, with more than 1,200 health care professionals and community members coming together to call for changes that protect and strengthen our health care systems. Among the top priorities were increasing BadgerCare reimbursement to cover the actual cost of care and addressing workforce challenges through grant programs and red-tape reduction measures such as prior authorization reform.

Local leaders and decision-makers also have a role to play. By championing fair reimbursement rates, supporting hospital-friendly legislation and investing in health care education and workforce training initiatives, we aren't just supporting care providers—we're protecting the jobs, partnerships and public services that hospitals make possible in every corner of our state.

As community members, we can express our support by staying informed, engaging with hospital leaders and sharing personal stories about how these institutions have impacted our families and friends. Advocacy doesn't just happen in legislative offices; it starts with our voices.

The closure of just one hospital can mean delays in care, reduced access to specialized treatments and economic shocks that ripple throughout a community. A recent statewide poll showed that more than 70% of Wisconsinites say they are concerned about hospital closures and access issues, highlighting just how much we rely on these institutions. This concern transcends political and social divisions, showing that hospitals are deeply valued and trusted anchors of our society.

But trust is not enough to guarantee their sustainability. Support from policymakers, health care advocates and community members is vital.



Eric Borgerding

This week, as we dedicate time to honor hospitals and health care professionals, let's remember that strong hospitals require strong, united support. Whether through advocating for fair and equitable policies, participating in community health initiatives or simply expressing gratitude to health care workers, we all have a role to play in sustaining these essential institutions.

Together, we can ensure our hospitals thrive – not just for today, but for generations to come.

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EDUCATION EVENTS

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Critical Access Hospital (CAH) Conditions of Participation Series

May. 22, 2025

How to Implement a Near Miss Program

May. 22, 2025

Critical Access Hospital (CAH) Conditions of Participation Series