

Wisconsin Hospital Association, Inc.



## NEWS

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### **Hospitals Strive to Increase Patient Awareness of Billing Policies: WHA Promotes Progressive Billing Guidelines with Wisconsin Attorney General**

**MADISON (May 1, 2007)** ----- Fear of a bill should never prevent a patient from seeking care at a Wisconsin hospital. The fact is, oftentimes patients are unaware of charity care and low-income discount policies of Wisconsin hospitals. This lack of awareness can discourage them from seeking care or seeking financial assistance once care is provided. Wisconsin hospitals are determined to help alleviate these concerns by making their billing and collection policies more visible to the public, easier to understand, and more consistently applied.

The Wisconsin Hospital Association today released a newly revised set of billing and collection guidelines ([www.wha.org](http://www.wha.org)) that will help hospitals as they review and revise the policies they use when assisting uninsured patients. The new guidelines suggest income eligibility levels for financial assistance, ways to address catastrophic hospital bills, and reasonable collection practices.

Speaking at the WHA Advocacy Day in Madison today, Wisconsin Attorney General J.B. Van Hollen applauded the Association's guidelines for providing clear guidance to hospitals in this highly sensitive, and often misunderstood, aspect of the American health care system.

"Wisconsin hospitals have stepped up to the plate to address concerns about certain billing practices for the poor and uninsured and moved forward with a set of patient-centered guidelines," Van Hollen said. "My office worked with the hospital association and reviewed the new guidelines to ensure transparent billing practices for the uninsured and charity care. The uninsured are entitled to know what services will likely cost, before they incur charges. I am satisfied that the new guidelines provide a thoughtful approach to bill and to collect payments from those that are uninsured, and I applaud the hospital association's efforts," he added.

Wisconsin hospitals are being asked to confirm in writing that their policies and practices on charges, charity care, billing and debt collection meet or exceed the principles set down in the WHA Billing and Collection guidelines. The "Confirmation of Commitment" assures patients that hospitals' billing practices reflect respect and compassion for all patients while also communicating the need to obtain fair payment for services from patients who are able to pay. The WHA intends to publish a list of hospitals that have signed and returned a confirmation.

Caring for patients who cannot pay is not new. WHA President Steve Brenton said Wisconsin hospitals provide uncompensated care to 2,600 patients each day at a cost of

over \$1.5 million. Over the course of a year, over 965,000 individuals receive over \$550 million in uncompensated care. Brenton said all hospitals have processes in place to inform the public about the availability of charity care. However, the new guidelines will assist hospitals do an even better job in working with low-income patients and their families.

“Hospitals’ charity care policies do not eliminate personal responsibility,” Brenton said. “Financial aid policies must balance a patient’s need for financial assistance with the hospital’s broader fiscal responsibilities to the communities it serves,” he added.

“The people who work on the front lines of health care do so because they want to help others. They do everything they can to make sure people receive the life-saving treatments that they need to return to regular lives and their families,” Brenton said. The stories below are just a small sampling of the compassionate care delivered to those who were unable to pay their hospital bills.

- A 45-year-old female patient was diagnosed with breast cancer. Unfortunately, at the time she was diagnosed, she was only receiving income to take care of her elderly disabled father. She did not have health insurance of her own. She applied for Community Care from Holy Family Memorial and received a full discount. Her treatment took over one year and she received well over \$50,000 worth of treatment fully covered by Community Care. - Holy Family Memorial Hospital, Manitowoc
- “I found myself without health insurance six months after losing my job in 2004. A dull throbbing in my right side caused me to seek medical assistance at a regional clinic last February. A \$400 bill for blood work was paid out of pocket. I was told I needed a cat scan and a colonoscopy before treatment could begin. The estimated cost was \$6,000. I had been able to pay some of the smaller bills but that bill represented close to a third of my income...my income remains at the poverty level.

So when I learned I could apply to St. Clare Hospital for assistance, I did...I was grateful to the people that were so kind and sensitive with me every step of the way through the application process. In a society where I feel invisible, St. Clare Hospital was there when I needed medical help. It represents everything that I believe to be true concerning service for others.” – St. Clare Hospital, Baraboo

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