

GUEST COLUMN: More Nurses Needed to Meet Health Care Challenges

By Laura Hieb, President of the Wisconsin Organization of Nurse Leaders

Nurses and nurse leaders, and I am proud to be both, are facing unprecedented challenges. Workforce shortages have escalated, as has the demand for health care, and financial and inflationary pressures continue to grow on our hospitals and clinics.

Despite these challenges, my colleagues and I understand that we have an important duty in our roles as health care providers, which we are proud to uphold.

Nurses are the backbone of our health care system, filling a wide variety of direct care and support roles in every corner of our state and in every type of health care team. As a nurse for 34 years and a Wisconsin nursing leader, I know we've overcome more challenges than ever thought possible these last three years, but we are not done.

The entire country is facing a workforce shortage, and some businesses are closing or cutting back due to a lack of staff. Prices are rapidly rising to compete for the limited supply of labor. While some businesses can limit hours or take other steps to try and mitigate inflation, hospitals must be ready to provide all types of services every minute of every day.

In addition to the workforce challenges, health care faces an additional challenge with our aging baby boomers—an older population requiring more medical care. People older than 55 make up 28% of our population, but account for 57% of all health care spending, exacerbating health care cost and increasing demand for staff. Hospitals and their staff are working around the clock to ensure access to safe, high-quality care with the resources available.

Even as COVID subsides, demand for care remains high, so hospitals leaders and health care teams are working together to grow and support the health care workforce to provide the care our communities deserve, and that we are proud to provide.

Every day we continue to work on ways to create access to care and redesign our services for those that need it. Serving all who walk through their doors, regardless of ability to pay, is a cost uniquely shouldered by Wisconsin hospitals and health systems. It is our mission to give the aid and care that many find from no one and nowhere else, especially when they have no insurance.

But today, the hospital safety net is stretching thinner and thinner as nurses, doctors and other hospital workers provide not just care, but also social supports patients and families need as they seek care. I know nurses and health care providers will do all they can to sustain this safety net, but we must address a workforce stretched too thin. Finding ways to continue to attract individuals into health care, keep them in health care and feed their inner passion towards providing care to others is a top priority.

Being a nurse isn't easy, but it is incredibly rewarding. Every day we save lives, help families and sustain our communities. Few have that privilege or are entrusted with such a role.

As a nurse leader, I am committed to caring for those who care for you, and I ask that we all take the time to recognize, reward and thank all of the members of our health care team.

This article appeared in [The Cap Times](#) on March 23, 2023.

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- [Quality Improvement Poster Showcase in the Capitol Rotunda on April 18](#)
- [GUEST COLUMN: More Nurses Needed to Meet Health Care Challenges](#)
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