

DHS Secretary-Designee Kirsten Johnson Discusses Health Care Priorities with WHA Board

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Wisconsin Department of Health Services' Secretary-Designee Kirsten Johnson joined the WHA Board of Directors meeting on April 13 for a discussion that included a range of Medicaid and public health topics, with Johnson noting several times that she is hopeful we can "reimagine" care delivery in those areas.

Saying that she is "passionate about urban, rural and suburban," Johnson described her background and experiences working in health care in different geographic regions, including with Sen. Ron Kind in more rural areas of Wisconsin all the way to Milwaukee where she served as the city's health commissioner. WHA President and CEO Eric Borgerding noted how important that broad perspective is, as the WHA Board and its membership hail from communities of all sizes across the state.

Appointed to her position on Feb. 27, 2023, Johnson said she is interested in taking a more systemic look at health in Wisconsin. "We have cobbled together this health care system with Band-Aids," she said. "We need take a step back... do they make sense and how do we as a system make it better?"

With respect to Medicaid, Johnson acknowledged the complexity of the entire program, noting that there are different programs and different managed care organizations but there is work to be done to truly measure outcomes and make sure the program is doing what is best for patients. CEO of Beloit Health System Tim McKeveitt noted how critical the Medicaid program is for access to care and encouraged Johnson to ensure that reimbursement is sufficient to maintain that access.



L to R: WHA President and CEO Eric Borgerding, DHS Secretary-Designee Kirsten Johnson, WHA 2023 Chair David Hartberg

CEO of ThedaCare Dr. Imran Andrabi noted the critical importance of finding a solution to the delayed discharge problem, indicating that ThedaCare had 30 patients that day who were ready for discharge but remained in the hospital because they did not have a post-acute placement. Johnson acknowledged the urgency of the issue and noted that the administration wants to be as flexible as possible to come up with workable solutions.

WHA board members also noted that workforce, mental health, and ambulance services are all critical areas of concern right now. In addition, throughout the last three years during the pandemic, hospitals and health systems across Wisconsin had mixed experiences working with their local public health agencies. Johnson said that as a public health official she recognizes how important it is to build relationships at the local level. She also noted the need to take a step back from traditional public health issues and assess the lack of economic access and education that is driving poverty.

Despite all of the pressing needs and challenges, Johnson indicated she views her new role as an opportunity, saying she was excited to consider, "How do we use this moment in time to make a long-lasting impact in Wisconsin?"

For the remainder of the meeting, WHA's government relations staff provided various updates to the board discussing policy priorities and advocacy strategies for the legislative session, including the state budget.

WHA Senior Vice President Workforce and Clinical Practice Ann Zenk provided an extensive update on the release of [WHA's annual workforce report](#), including a wide array of opportunities to present the story of the hospital and health system workforce to media, to legislators and to health care stakeholders. Zenk highlighted for board members the headlines of the report: a workforce that is falling behind demand, doubling vacancy rates, a Wisconsin nursing shortage for the first time in over a decade and post-acute care bottlenecks creating unnecessary additional demand on the workforce and delaying care for patients who need it.

Zenk thanked the board for the hospital data and health care experience and expertise they share that drive WHA's workforce recommendations and workforce advocacy. As Borgerding noted, "We do this report every year, and we don't just put it on the shelf and wait for the next one," adding, "This report drives and advances our workforce advocacy."

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