

WHA Workforce Forum Focuses on Partnering to Grow Faster

WHA members from across Wisconsin gathered in Madison on Sept. 13 for WHA's Health Care Workforce Forum. Key partners joined health care leaders to focus on strategies to urgently grow the hospital and health system workforce in numbers and capabilities.

The day started off with WHA President and CEO Eric Borgerding, WHA Vice President of State and Federal Relations Jon Hoelter, and WHA Senior Vice President of Workforce and Clinical Practice Ann Zenk providing an overview of the demographics and supply and demand challenges facing Wisconsin employers and the state's health care workforce.

Borgerding described how health care is in the crosshairs of competing priorities and emphasized the importance of separating reality from rhetoric.

"The reality is that despite the mounting challenges hospitals and health systems are facing, Wisconsin hospitals have sustained the top-quality health care Wisconsin has long experienced," said Borgerding. "And the data shows it, with Wisconsin having the fourth largest share of five-star hospitals in the country in the 2023 Overall Hospital Quality Star Ratings from CMS."



WHA President and CEO Eric Borgerding



Ann Zenk

Zenk shared new hospital workforce data that she described as perhaps a stabilizing—but still very concerning—picture. "Vacancy rates are not above the historic levels noted in 2022, but eight of 17 of the workforce segments we track still have double-digit gaps between posted jobs and hires."

Before turning it over to Jon Hoelter for an update on WHA's work with state policymakers, Zenk and Borgerding both emphasized the importance of attendees sharing their stories to paint the reality of health care and health care careers for legislators, employers and, importantly, future entrants to health care professions.

Hoelter provided key examples of where those stories have already made a difference, such as in key investments in the workforce in the recently enacted state budget and in key recommendations by the Legislative Council Study Committee on Occupational Licensure that are now before the state Legislature. Hoelter also highlighted WHA's current advocacy for policy

changes that will help the workforce grow faster, break down barriers to post-acute care and make permanent flexibilities that ended with the public health emergency but are still needed.

Keynote speaker Natalie Johnson noted that in their challenging environment, "brave leadership," as described and developed by renowned researcher and author Brené Brown, is more essential than ever. In her interactive session, Johnson shared and helped participants experience an empirically-based courage-building program based on a collection of four skillsets that are teachable, measurable and observable.

In addition to seeing unreleased workforce data, participants were also among the first to preview WHA's upcoming workforce promotion campaign. The focus of the campaign is to get middle and high school-aged students interested in a career at a Wisconsin hospital by appealing directly to these generations and their adult influencers. WHA's Digital Communications Manager Molly Shea set up the session by detailing the effectiveness of using digital channels, particularly social media, as a recruitment tool for hospitals looking to reach a diverse audience and fill the health care career pipeline. Then, WHA Vice President of External Affairs Kari Hofer discussed the upcoming workforce campaign's goals, timeline and planned career resource. Vice President of Strategy at AMPERAGE Marketing & Fundraising Erin Bishop previewed the campaign's overarching theme (So Many Options), vision board and robust digital advertisement plan. The first phase of the campaign will be launched as soon as the end of this year.

Workforce forum attendees spent the afternoon learning about key workforce partnerships and sharing out their current partners and partnerships they are working to develop. Zenk shared an update on the WHA-created Grow Our Own grant program administered by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services that is growing public-private partnerships in



Natalie Johnson

every corner of our state to create training opportunities for physicians, advanced practice clinicians and allied health professionals. Wisconsin's state Area Health Education Center (AHEC) Program Director Liz Bush and Traci R. Lindsey, Executive Director, South Central AHEC, and their health care partner SSM Regional Community Health Manager Megan Timm provided information on how hospitals and health systems can partner with AHEC to support future health professionals. Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (DWD) Division of Employment & Training Administrator Michele Carter shared an update on the fastest growing segment of Wisconsin apprenticeships, health care, and let attendees know how they can access DWD support and expertise to sponsor these learn-while-you-earn opportunities at their own organizations.

The day was wrapped up with a networking opportunity for the group. WHA Vice President Education and Marketing Leigh Ann Larson facilitated a discussion with attendees of how they are utilizing community partnerships to positively impact the health care workforce. Larson noted that the results of this discussion won't just be useful to attendees, but their work will also help inform WHA's workforce advocacy, education and outreach efforts.



Steve Bench

Zenk welcomed the final presenter of the day, keynote speaker Steve Bench, to talk about the challenges and opportunities of a five-generation workforce and share a few laughs along the way. Bench talked about how baby boomers, generation X, millennials, generation Z, and the newly christened generation Alpha grew up, what's important to them, and how they operate in the workplace.

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