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January 6, 2022

Karen E. Timberlake  
Department of Health Services  
Office of the Secretary  
P.O. Box 7850  
Madison, WI 53707-7850

Dear Secretary-designee Timberlake:

Thank you for all your administration is doing to combat this COVID-19 pandemic, including the Wisconsin Department of Health Services Agency staffing resource assistance. These resources have been a great help to Wisconsin hospitals (and nursing homes) over the past several months as they deal with both a surge of patients and a shortage of staff.

As you well know, Wisconsin hospitals and health systems report ever-increasing inability to find staff for desperately needed inpatient beds. Hospitals and health systems employ every strategy they can to recruit and retain health care workers, including utilizing staffing agencies. While agency, or “traveler”, staff are not new and have been an important asset in this current fight, the extensive utilization of expensive agency staff is inadvertently exacerbating health care’s workforce challenges.

Our members across the state are reporting a greater exodus of nurses, respiratory therapists and other staff leaving to work for temporary staffing agencies and then being deployed to work within the same community or region - *travel nurses don’t have to travel very far anymore*. To be clear, we believe this is a situation being experienced with all or most travel agency staffing, not just those resources obtained via the state’s (appreciated) agency staffing efforts.

Other states are struggling with this issue and an approach utilized by Texas may be helpful here: travel agencies are asked to deploy only non-state residents who have not been employed by a state hospital or health care facility within 30 days.

As noted during Deputy Secretary Deb Standridge’s discussion with the WHA Board on December 16, DHS is aware of this “robbing Peter to pay Paul” dilemma. We appreciate the assurance given by Deputy Secretary Standridge that the Department is seeking to mitigate this situation however possible, including asking agencies to recruit and deploy from out-of-state. We ask you to reiterate to the state contracted agencies as a strong expectation, or as a requirement if that is possible at this stage, to deploy to Wisconsin only non-residents of Wisconsin who have not been employed by a Wisconsin hospital or health care facility within 30 days.

Thank you, again, for the partnership, the much-appreciated staffing resources, and for considering this important request. WHA would be happy to meet with you to discuss.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Eric Borgerding'.

Eric Borgerding  
President & CEO

CC: Deputy Secretary, Debra Standridge