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TO: Assembly Committee on Regulatory Licensing Reform

**FROM: Ann Zenk, SVP Workforce & Clinical Practice
Jon Hoelter, VP Federal & State Relations**

DATE: May 10, 2023

RE: WHA Testimony in Support of AB 202; Relating to: investigations of conviction records by the Department of Safety and Professional Services for purposes of determining eligibility for credentials and granting rule-making authority

Chairman Sortwell, and members of the Committee on Regulatory Licensing Reform, thank you for holding a hearing on AB 202, relating to: investigations of conviction records by the Department of Safety and Professional Services for purposes of determining eligibility for credentials and granting rule-making authority. The Wisconsin Hospital Association represents more than 135 hospitals and integrated health systems across the state, from small, rural, Critical Access Hospitals to large, urban academic medical centers, and everything in between.

While our members may differ greatly in the size of the community they serve, one consistent challenge they all face is how to meet the ever-increasing demand for health care services in an environment where every sector is experiencing a workforce shortage. A few weeks ago I had the privilege of providing a briefing for legislators and staff on our 2023 workforce report which highlighted the scale of the challenge our hospitals face:

While staffing at hospitals continues to rise, it is not keeping pace with demand as approximately 10,000 positions remain vacant in Wisconsin hospitals across the state. In fact, vacancy rates have increased for all 17 health care positions that we track – and nearly doubled overall from 5.3% in 2020 to 9.9% in 2021.

Even worse, demographics are working against health care, as the highest utilizers of health care are those aged 65 and older who are also retiring from the healthcare workforce. It will be seven years from now when the last baby boomers turn 65, meaning that we have yet to experience the full impact of the baby boom generation on the demand for health care and, thus, our health care workforce.

Fortunately, we have had great partners in the Wisconsin Legislature and the Evers Administration. The Department of Safety and Professional Services (DPS) has made significant efforts to alleviate these challenges under the Evers Administration, partly by implementing a new, and long overdue, electronic licensure system. Despite this forward-thinking measure, licensure backlogs still remain – backlogs that could be greatly reduced by passing the important reform introduced as AB 202, a proposal that was initially introduced with the backing of DPS in the last legislative session.

WHA was privileged to serve on the Legislative Council Study Committee on Occupational Licensure, along with Representative Sortwell, and the Study Committee also overwhelmingly supported AB 202. AB 202 aims to greatly reduce lengthy and unnecessary delays for legal reviews of remote and isolate occurrences that are needlessly creating months of anxious waiting time for applicants, many hours of compiling documentation for DPS staff, and many more hours reviewing remote and isolated events by Wisconsin's professional licensing board – events that the applicant thought they had successfully put behind them.

Since August 2021, WHA has asked DSPS to help with hundreds of licensure delays. Almost twenty percent of those delays involved a legal review by DSPS, and the delays involved were by far the lengthiest. None of these applicants forwarded by WHA were denied a license when the legal review was finally complete.

We believe the current workforce challenge is an all-hands-on-deck moment for policy makers. In addition to passing this reform, and other bills that were recommended by the Legislative Council Study Committee on Occupational Licensure, we encourage the legislature to work closely with DSPS to analyze their budget request and allocate staff or other resources that will right-size the agency and enable it to better accomplish the important work it is entrusted with.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of this important legislation. WHA and our members urge you to support Assembly Bill 202 so we can build on the positive reforms Governor Evers and the Legislature have already begun and help sustain and expand the workforce hospitals and health systems need to meet growing demand for care.