

Rural Health Conference: A Panel on Advancing Health Workforce Well-Being Across Hospital Settings



L to R: Dr. Mike Stadler, Dr. Wendy Ledesma, Nadine Allen, Sue Anderson, Dr. Heather Schmidt, Shawn Lerch, Dr. Stephanie Simmons

As one of the breakout sessions at this year's Wisconsin Rural Health Conference, a panel on "Caring for Wisconsin's Caregivers" emphasized that high reliability in health care is built on cultures that actively support caregiver well-being, recognizing it as a foundational driver of patient safety, workforce stability and organizational performance. Panelists included:

- Sue Anderson, Regional President, SSM Health Wisconsin
- Shawn Lerch, CEO, Sauk Prairie Health
- Heather Schmidt, DO, Chief Wellness Officer, SSM Health Fond du Lac Integrative Health
- Wendy Ledesma, MD, Chief Wellness Officer, Sauk Prairie Health
- Moderator: Dr. Stephanie Simmons, Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation



Dr. Mike Stadler, Health Workforce Wellbeing Landmark Initiative Champion at the Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin Endowment (AHW), and Nadine Allen, Chief Quality Officer at the Wisconsin Hospital Association (WHA), opened the session by introducing the landmark initiative designed and funded by AHW, noting that WHA and the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes Foundation were selected as key partners to lead this work across Wisconsin. As the moderator, Dr. Stefanie Simmons guided a thoughtful conversation across diverse perspectives.

Panelists grounded the discussion in personal experiences that illustrated how culture is ultimately defined by how organizations support their caregivers, with burnout and inefficiencies directly impacting both care delivery and team effectiveness. This shared "personal why" reinforced that investing in caregiver well-being is central to shaping organizational culture and long-term sustainability.

Lerch described how Sauk Prairie Health's commitment to personalized care extends beyond patients to caregivers, embedding well-being into daily operations and leadership strategy. Dr. Ledesma highlighted the importance of transparent dialogue between clinicians and executives, underscoring that lasting change begins with clearly articulated frontline "asks" and evolves through tailored, organization specific solutions.

From a systems perspective, Anderson reinforced that well-being must be approached with the same discipline as quality and safety, integrating it into core organizational frameworks, measurement and accountability structures. Viewing caregiver well-being through this lens ensures it remains central to how culture is built, sustained and measured across the organization.

Schmidt and Anderson also explored the complexities of scaling these efforts across large health systems, where aligning system wide priorities with local implementation requires both flexibility and trust. They emphasized that strong bidirectional communication is essential to ensuring frontline experiences shape broader strategy while maintaining consistency in values.

Across all perspectives, panelists expressed optimism about the Caring for Wisconsin's Caregivers initiative, highlighting the learning collaborative as an opportunity to strengthen a culture rooted in caregiver well-being, accelerate shared solutions, foster innovation and build a more sustainable health workforce across the state.

IN THIS ISSUE

- WHA CEO Leaders Discuss the Future of Rural Health Care at Wisconsin Rural Health Conference
- That's a Wrap: 2026 WHA Wisconsin Rural Health Conference Experiences Continued Attendance Growth
- Rural Conference Keynote Offers Insight into Multi-Generational Workforce
- Rural Health Conference: A Panel on Advancing Health Workforce Well-Being Across Hospital Settings
- Rural Conference Closer Brings Energy, Humor and Insight to Group
- Rural Health Transformation Grant Opportunities Now Open for Wisconsin Hospitals, Rural Health Clinics and Other Providers
- 2026 WHA Health Care Leadership Academy Graduates Ten New Leaders
- Ten Quality Improvement Leaders Complete Wisconsin Quality Residency Program

EDUCATION EVENTS

Jun. 23, 2026

Rising Claims, Real Impacts: Wisconsin Hospital Risk Trends and What Leaders Can Do Now

Aug. 4, 2026

Seeing the Real Market: Using Claims Enhanced Intelligence to Make Better Strategy, Access, and Growth Decisions

Sep. 10, 2026

Caring for Wisconsin's Caregivers: 2026 WHA Healthcare Workforce Well-being Summit