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Sen. Brad Pfaff Highlights Rural Health Care, Workforce and Medicaid at WHA Public Policy Council

State Sen. Brad Pfaff (D-Onalaska) joined the Wisconsin Hospital Association's (WHA) Public Policy Council on April 16 at WHA's headquarters in Fitchburg. During the council meeting, he discussed the importance of sustaining Wisconsin's health care infrastructure, strengthening the health care workforce and advancing bipartisan policies that support hospitals and the patients they serve.



Sen. Brad Pfaff speaks at WHA's April 16 Council on Public Policy meeting.

Pfaff, who represents western Wisconsin, framed his remarks through the lens of his rural district and the central role hospitals play in those communities.

"I am someone who is from the country, and I'm very proud of my rural roots, and I consider myself a rural advocate," Pfaff said. "I do my very best to be a rural leader, and health care is extremely important in rural Wisconsin."

He said Medicaid reimbursement remains one of the most pressing issues facing providers and communities in the state.

"I want to talk to you about Medicaid reimbursement, and I want to make sure that we can keep our health care infrastructure strong," Pfaff said. "That is what is so very, very important in the rural areas that I represent."

Pfaff also pointed to the ongoing financial strain facing hospitals, including the impact of recent federal policy changes, while pledging to work in partnership with WHA and its members.

"There is tremendous stress that's been put on our health care infrastructure," Pfaff said. "I stand ready to partner with you as we try and figure out the implications as we move forward as a result of the recent legislation that came out of Washington, D.C."

Workforce Development

A major focus of the discussion was health care workforce development. Pfaff said Wisconsin has an opportunity to grow and strengthen its workforce in ways that benefit patients, communities and the state economy.

"I think that we have an opportunity to build out an even stronger workforce in health care that I think is a win-win," Pfaff said. "It is a win-win, obviously, for patients and those that are health care consumers, but I think it's a real win for our economies, our local economies and the state economy overall."

He also highlighted the role higher education can play in addressing workforce shortages, including partnerships with UW-La Crosse and other institutions to expand health care education and training opportunities.

Later in the conversation, Pfaff returned to the challenge of maintaining access to care in rural areas amid demographic pressures and provider shortages.

Pfaff warned that Wisconsin is projected to lose a significant number of physicians over the next decade, particularly in rural areas. He said he wants to continue working with hospitals on solutions, adding, "I would love to have that conversation" and "I hope that we can partner."

Budget & Medicaid Pressures

WHA President & CEO Kyle O'Brien opened the budget discussion by thanking Pfaff for his support of the most recent state budget that included increased support for hospitals.

"This was an opportunity to get something done," Pfaff said. "In the state budget, this is where we need to demonstrate that we can actually govern as legislators and we can actually work to accomplish the goals of the state."

He added that while the budget was not perfect, it was a meaningful step forward.

"I thought this glass was more than half full," Pfaff said. "And I was happy to vote for it."

O'Brien noted that even with the additional support secured in the budget, the funding still covers only about half of hospitals' Medicaid losses. He also emphasized that the state is a significant beneficiary of the program, adding, "So we're partners in making sure that this program works."

Pfaff agreed that more work remains. He said the state must continue focusing on reimbursement and warned of the long-term consequences of failing to do so. "I do worry about the overall viability of our health care infrastructure" because "you can only have so many loss leaders," Pfaff said, adding that continued advocacy will be important to keep attention on the issue.

The conversation also touched on recently enacted "Next-of-Kin" legislation, which Pfaff said he supported from day one and wants to see succeed. He encouraged WHA members to stay in touch as implementation moves forward, acknowledging the new law will need reauthorization in three years.

Looking Ahead

When asked about concerns that future political shifts could bring policy proposals that create new burdens for hospitals, Pfaff emphasized a practical, incremental approach.

"We need to be pro-growth," Pfaff said. "We need to be looking about what we can do in order to grow our economy and provide people opportunities."

Throughout the discussion, Pfaff repeatedly returned to the value of partnership — with hospitals, educators, policymakers and communities — as Wisconsin works through health care workforce shortages, reimbursement challenges and access issues. He said he looks forward to continuing those conversations with WHA and its members in the months ahead.

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EDUCATION EVENTS

Apr. 27, 2026

Emergency Preparedness Regulations: Is Your Hospital Prepared for the Next Emergency?

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Best Practices in Healthcare Master Planning & Budgeting

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WHA 2026 Wisconsin Health Care Workforce Webinar Series - Part 2: Relieve Workforce Burden