

Lawmakers Discuss State Budget Priorities, Debate Solutions to Workforce Licensure Delays during WHA Advocacy Day Legislative Panel

A bipartisan panel of the Wisconsin State Legislature's budget-writing Joint Finance Committee (JFC) joined WHA's 2023 Advocacy Day on April 19 in Madison for a discussion of this session's top legislative issues impacting hospitals and health systems. WHA Senior Vice President of Government Relations Kyle O'Brien moderated the discussion on several issues impacting the state budget including budget surplus spending and Medicaid expansion, as well as a dialogue on the health care workforce shortage and licensure delays.



L to R: WHA Senior Vice President of Government Relations Kyle O'Brien; Rep. Evan Goyke (D-Milwaukee), Sen. Pat Testin (R-Stevens Point), Rep. Mark Born (R-Beaver Dam), and Sen. LaTonya Johnson (D-Milwaukee).

Kicking off the discussion on priorities in the 2023-2025 State Budget, Rep. Mark Born (R-Beaver Dam) said, "It will be a very similar budget to what you've seen in the last two budgets – investments in a variety of priorities from education, roads, health care, broadband—things that are important throughout Wisconsin, throughout our districts." Born reiterated to the audience, "I am confident that we will again make investments in health care."

On the topic of Medicaid expansion, the two Democrats expressed support for the policy while the two Republicans rejected it.

Sen. LaTonya Johnson (D-Milwaukee) said, "Medicaid expansion needs to happen. If the conversation is about resources and additional funding, we are passing up on billions of dollars of additional money that could have come into the state and would save us \$1.6 billion that could be reinvested in other things."

On the other side, Sen. Pat Testin (R-Stevens Point) said, "At a time when reimbursement rates are so low, my concern is that [Medicaid expansion] would be a shock to the system." Testin added, "We should be getting people off of government run health care and get them into the exchanges or on private insurance where reimbursement rates are at a much better rate."

Ultimately, all four lawmakers found common ground on the necessity for an increase in Medicaid reimbursement rates in this state budget acknowledging its impact on access to health care for communities across the state.

The panel showed differing opinions on the topic of health care workforce licensure delays within the Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services (DSPS). The lawmakers debated possible solutions from adding more staffing to how the department is funding to leadership.

“Something has to happen to give DSPS additional people to conduct the reviews, and I think they are under better leadership than they were the last few months and years,” said Rep. Evan Goyke (D-Milwaukee).

“They have positions they cannot even fill. DSPS has funds available. There is a lot more to it than just adding new positions,” said Born. “Thankfully, it appears there are some things going in the right direction with the new secretary. That was the impression we got when he testified in front of the Joint Finance Committee and from calls decreasing to our offices. But it didn’t take new positions, it took new leadership,” Born continued.

The panel discussed the type of staff hired also makes a difference – full-time compared to contracted temporary staff.

Johnson weighed in, “Why are the applications being processed a little bit faster? It’s because of those additional staff. The reality is if you want things to improve, you’re going to have to hire those full-time staff members that have the capability of assisting you in all aspects.”

During the exchange, Born commented, “I think you’re getting a good look at why this is difficult, and why sometimes trying to find out what the real problems are is such a challenge.”

The panel concluded with the lawmakers’ advice for grassroots advocates as they meet with their local lawmakers in the capitol.

“I am going to assume the vast majority of you came here today for somebody else – not for you, but a patient. There is somebody in your mind or in your heart that brought you here today,” said Goyke. “Bring the one-pager, bring the spreadsheet, show us the pie chart, but that is not the key to success in the Legislature—storytelling is. It’s the human experience. It’s the work that you all do on a daily basis. You want to get me to “Yes,” tell the stories of what you all are doing,” added Goyke.

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