



Wisconsin Health Care Association

Wisconsin Center for Assisted Living

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Skilled Nursing Care Week Highlights the Selfless Work of Wisconsin's Long-Term Caregivers

By John Vander Meer

In recognition of National Skilled Nursing Care Week, Governor Scott Walker has proclaimed May 13-19 as Skilled Nursing Care Week in Wisconsin. This weeklong acknowledgement of the committed care provided by Wisconsin's long-term caregivers is an opportunity to highlight the many contributions of long-term care providers in Wisconsin. It's also an opportunity to continue a discussion on the challenges the long-term care profession faces during a difficult time for many providers.

It is often said that we as a society will be ultimately judged on how we treat our most vulnerable citizens, including our elderly and disabled friends, family, and neighbors. Caregivers and staff at Wisconsin's skilled nursing centers are dedicated to serving those who cannot care for themselves. They help feed, change, clean, and comfort their residents. They build unbreakable bonds with their residents, earning their trust and confidence. They cultivate a sense of family and community.

That sense of family and community extends far outside the walls of the skilled nursing center. Local nursing centers serve as a major employer and economic engine in communities across the state. They help drive local and regional economic activity, including visitors and staff buying local goods, and also through purchasing products and services from third-party long-term care vendors such as food distributors and medical supplies. Statewide, long-term care facilities support an estimated \$8.95 billion of the state's economic activity.

Given the integral role of skilled nursing centers in communities – as centers for care and as economic hubs – it is alarming to learn of the challenges many of these facilities in Wisconsin currently face. Wisconsin continues to rank among the worst in the nation in skilled nursing Medicaid reimbursement. Considering that nearly 2/3 of skilled nursing care residents rely on Medicaid to pay their bills, skilled nursing centers are forced to operate under an inadequate funding system.

The problem is most evident in the ongoing long-term caregiver workforce shortage. Due to low reimbursement, providers often cannot offer nursing assistants wages that compete with wages offered at convenience stores and fast food restaurants. Without proper staffing, many care centers are unable to admit new residents, even if they have beds and rooms available. A recent Wisconsin survey found that 1 in 5 long-term caregiver positions remains unfilled.

The long-term care workforce shortage has reached crisis proportions, and the results are being felt across the state. Since 2016, 16 Wisconsin nursing care centers have closed, with more closing this year. Closures often have especially negative impacts on rural communities, where a local nursing center may be the largest employer. A recent nursing center closure in Dallas, north of Eau Claire, will lead to more than 40 jobs lost in a village with a population of 409. These types of losses can be devastating for local communities. And stress to a frail elderly

resident who has called a community their home for their entire life being forced to relocate 10, 20, 50 miles away can take a serious toll on residents' health and wellbeing.

State leaders are taking notice of these challenges. Long-term care providers are grateful to Governor Walker and the legislature for including a 2 percent skilled nursing Medicaid reimbursement increase in the 2017-19 budget, along with a \$60 million funding increase for Family Care. The Department of Health Services has implemented an innovative program called the WisCaregiver Career Program where interested applicants can receive free Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) training and receive a \$500 bonus upon working as a CNA for 6 months (find out more at www.wiscaregiver.com). These policies are positive steps toward a sustainable long-term care system in Wisconsin.

But continued facility closures demonstrate that there is much more to be done. Wisconsin's current skilled nursing Medicaid reimbursement system is broken, and the time is now for the state to consider systemic skilled nursing Medicaid reimbursement reform.

Long-term care providers are problem solvers. Caregivers always stand ready and eager to find solutions in a profession where their decisions can impact health and quality of life. So as providers face these challenges, we want to be part of the solution. Providers look forward to continuing their work with state legislators and the governor to address these challenges.

Ask any member of a care team at a skilled nursing center what they do, and they'll tell you that their top priority is ensuring the health and wellbeing of the residents they care for each day. While funding challenges may add additional stresses, there is no question that providers are focused on providing the highest quality care possible. But it is important to remember that a skilled nursing center serves many roles, which makes skilled nursing Medicaid reimbursement reform all the more critical.

Your local skilled nursing center is a health care facility. It is an employer. It is an economic engine in your local community.

And for many, it's home.

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The Wisconsin Health Care Association (WHCA) is a non-profit organization dedicated to representing, protecting, and advancing the interests of Wisconsin's long-term and post-acute care provider community and the residents they serve. The Wisconsin Center for Assisted Living (WiCAL) is a division of WHCA that advocates for assisted living facilities by helping our members provide the highest quality services to the Badger State's frail and elderly citizens. Together, WHCA/WiCAL is Wisconsin's most representative LTC provider association.