

Gutierrez looking forward to review of state's licensing requirements

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Laura Gutierrez, the new secretary of DSPS, tells WisPolitics.com the agency's "very excited" to work with lawmakers on a comprehensive overview of the state's licensing requirements, which is aimed at seeing whether some of those should still be in place or get tweaked.

Walker proposed in his biennial budget establishing a council within the Department of Safety and Professional Services tasked with that responsibility. But the Joint Finance Committee removed that provision from the budget, along with more than 80 other non-fiscal items.

Still, lawmakers could introduce a bill setting up that council or something similar to it. Several Republicans and some conservative groups have also been studying the issue for months.

Gutierrez said in an interview this week she doesn't have any specific changes in mind right now, but the agency wants to do what it can to "create more jobs and remove barriers into some of these professions" while maintaining high safety standards.

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"I think it's always a best practice to take a look at all of them [and] say, 'If this made sense 10 years ago, does it still make sense? Do we have other safety measures in place that would allow us to not have to license and create more jobs or remove red tape?'" she said.

Gutierrez, who was appointed in February, comes to DSPS with more than 18 years of experience in education, most recently as vice president of academic affairs at St. Anthony's School, the country's largest Catholic grade school and a participant

in the Milwaukee voucher program.

She also spent five years as a Milwaukee Public Schools teacher and was director of instruction at the Bruce Guadalupe Community School, a charter school that's part of the United Community Center in Milwaukee's south side. She met Walker there while he visited the school as part of his reading initiative.

Gutierrez, who has a master's degree in curriculum and instruction from Marquette University, got into education after working as a lab technician. The motivation, she said, was to teach girls about "all the different fields you can tap into" in science.

"Knowing that science was a field that a lot of girls or women weren't involved in, I thought this might be an opportunity for me to spark that interest," she said.

As a teacher and administrator, she said, she learned to be the "voice of students" who needed help finding opportunities or navigating the system — which she said is similar to her new role at DSPS.

— Among the most notable budget items for DSPS is Walker's proposal to exempt people who complete some apprenticeship programs from having to take an exam to get their state license.

The exemption would apply to journeyman plumbers, electricians and sprinkler fitters, as well as barbers and cosmetologists.

Some have criticized the budget item, saying the tests are a critical safeguard that ensure people know safety procedures and codes. But Gutierrez called the tests an extra barrier for apprentices who've spent years working under licensed professionals and sitting "in the front seat of what it really is to be in this profession."

She likened the provision to Marquette and UW-Madison law school grads who don't have to take the bar to practice in Wisconsin. And the state, she said, already reviews apprenticeship programs to make sure they train people adequately.

"If we want to continue to boost our economy, we should trust these schools and put the responsibility on them that they are delivering professional electricians and plumbers out to us," she said. "And if not, then they should not be in business."

— She also pushed back against concerns over Walker's proposal to eliminate the

Educational Approval Board, which regulates for-profit higher education institutions, and move its responsibilities to DSPS.

David Dies, the EAB executive secretary, said in February the state would lose the valuable expertise of EAB members under the new structure. Board members unanimously voted to oppose the proposal.

But Dies also said one benefit would be that the EAB would gain access to the legal team at DSPS, as the EAB doesn't have lawyers on staff.

Gutierrez pointed to that as one major benefit of the move, while also noting her background in ensuring high educational standards.

"Our agency does nothing but regulate, so when you look at everything that the agency can bring to complement the EAB, it definitely makes sense," Gutierrez said.

— Gutierrez also highlighted DSPS' work on tackling opioid abuse, particularly the agency's prescription drug monitoring program.

The PDMP system has been in place since June 2013 and stores data on patient prescriptions so health care professionals can make more informed decisions when considering prescribing a drug.

A February report from the Controlled Substances Board found opioid prescriptions dropped by 11.7 percent in the last quarter of 2016, compared to the same period in 2015.

The PDMP database was initially voluntary for health care professionals to check, but a law authored by Rep. John Nygren, R-Marinette, last session requires them to check it as of this month.

The next step, she said, is getting a budget provision approved that would hire staff to help analyze data and "continue to bring that awareness amongst the prescribers."

"We're excited," she said. "This is a program that is being looked at nationwide."

Listen to the interview:

<https://soundcloud.com/wispolitics/interview-with-dsps-secretary-laura-gutierrez/>