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Profile: Department of Health Services Secretary Andrea Palm

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WisPolitics.com is profiling some of the newly announced state agency heads. This installment features Department of Health Services Secretary Andrea Palm.

Palm most recently served as senior counselor to the Health and Human Services secretary under President Obama. She also worked for then-U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton.

Birthplace, age?
46 years old, born in Star Lake, N.Y.

Job history?
Most recently held a series of roles within the federal Department of Health and Human Services under the length of then-President Obama's two terms in office, including working as chief of staff and senior counselor. She also previously worked in Congress, including for then-U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton.

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Education?
Received her undergraduate degree in human services studies from Cornell University; attended graduate school at Washington University in St. Louis.

Family?
Married to Dan Utech for nearly seven years. Her parents and sister live in central New York. She's an aunt to her sister's two daughters, as well as to children on her husband's side of the family.

Favorite non-work interests?
Loves to travel and spend time with her nieces and nephew. Enjoys photography,

particularly wildlife photography.

Why the interest in being in the Evers administration?
"So I have, as I mentioned, served in government in a number of sort of seats at the table. And I really find just such immense satisfaction and fulfillment out of public service. I think that government has a real role to play. It's not the solver of all problems, but government needs to work for the people that it serves. And I just have had an unbelievable privilege in doing that in a number of ways. And so when I heard Gov. Evers, then-candidate Evers, talking about his vision for governing and leadership and the things that he wanted to bring to the state of Wisconsin in terms of what he was hearing from the public and the kinds of priorities he had and the way he approached bipartisanship and compromise and working together, I just really, it was just an opportunity I couldn't resist, because I think we really have an opportunity in government to deliver for people, and that's something that I care deeply about."

What are your priorities for the agency under your leadership?
"So I think there's a number of places where we have an opportunity to really deliver for the state of Wisconsin. Obviously, our biggest priority is the expansion of the Medicaid program to cover an additional 82,000 folks in Wisconsin and pull down this federal money that we've been leaving on the table for a very long time, to invest in health care for everybody, not just for folks who are served by the Medicaid program. So I think our ability to make those investments not only is really important on the coverage side of things but really will help us build on what is an historic and important legacy for Wisconsin. We've been health care innovators and real leaders in health care in Wisconsin for a long time, and this federal money will allow us to do important things to build on that legacy. And for me personally, some of those priorities lie in the behavioral health space. I think we've got a real opportunity to integrate behavioral health into the health care system, find those efficiencies, reduce those silos and the stigma that goes along with providing substance abuse and mental health services in a way that makes it clear that when you pull into that parking lot that that's what you're going there for, and that reduces people's desire and willingness to get and seek treatment that they need. And so I think we've got real opportunities with investments from the Medicaid expansion to do good work in that space. We have a real obligation … as a state that's aging and a workforce that's aging, to think long-term about what we need to serve folks in long-term care specifically: home and community-based services, institutional settings like nursing homes, assisted living. How are we thinking

strategically about where we need to be in 10 years or 15 years so that the investments we make now prepare us for where we need to be again so we're serving the people of Wisconsin? It's not a surprise, right? We know where we're headed from an aging perspective, and we have an opportunity to get in front of that and we should absolutely take advantage of that. So those are a couple of places where I think we have real opportunities. I think, from a girl who likes government, I think the way we interface with other government agencies to serve people is a critical opportunity. The Department of Children and Families serves very similar, in many cases, the exact same families that we serve here in the Department of Health Services. How are we doing a better job together so that that interface with those families is as seamless and invisible as possible to them? How are we getting out of the way so that they get what they need and are successful? Same with the Department of Corrections; we have considerable overlap as some of the folks coming out of corrections facilities who we then are working with in the community — whether it's because they need health care, because they are in need of FoodShare, other services that we provide. How are we reducing barriers to their success by working better with DOC to do those kinds of things? So I think those are some of the opportunities I see. Public health a fundamental function of government, whether it's a measles outbreak, whether it's flooding, whether it's — we have a role to play to make sure that the citizens of this state have access to what they need to recover and be resilient and get back to their normal, everyday lives. So those are functions that need to work. And they're critical, and they're sort of invisible to the public until you need them. And we want to make sure that when our time comes to step up because of a measles outbreak or some other thing, that we are ready to flex and be a part of the solution for the people of this state."

What's the best advice you've received since getting the job? Worst advice?

"I think the best and the worst advice I got is exactly the same thing, and that was: Buy a parka. I don't think you say that to somebody you're trying to get to move to Wisconsin. So that was not strategically the best advice somebody probably could have given me. But on the flip side, once you're in and you take the job, buying that parka was absolutely the way I survived my first three months in Wisconsin, and I'm grateful."

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