

Dept. of Safety and Professional Services: Concludes 2021 with multiple successes benefiting stakeholders throughout Wisconsin

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MADISON, Wis. – Despite ongoing pandemic challenges, the Department of Safety and Professional Services is wrapping up 2021 with several key successes and achievements that will benefit individuals and businesses in all parts of the state.

Among these is the [relaunch of the Wisconsin Fund](#), a grant program that helps low-income individuals and businesses replace failing or failed private onsite wastewater treatment systems (POWTS), which are commonly referred to as septic systems. The department worked with industry stakeholders and members of the legislature to restore funding to the program. The cost of repairing or replacing POWTS is often prohibitive, and many individuals and businesses do not have the thousands of dollars necessary for the work. This can lead to tainted wells and groundwater, which threaten health and the environment.

The department also worked to secure [funding for a septic study](#), conducted by Professor Rob Michitsch at UW-Stevens Point, that will lead to more accurate recommendations regarding safe septic waste disposal. This could potentially save money for farmers and septic handlers.

“Both of these efforts required diligence and collaboration across state government and with interested stakeholder groups,” said DSPS Secretary Dawn Crim. “We identified needs and then we worked together to make things happen. Our collaborative efforts will make a difference, particularly for rural Wisconsin

communities.”

Other funding initiatives include two new grant programs that made it into the biennial budget. One will address recruitment and retention efforts in the fire service by partially funding efforts to develop training programs for high-school students. The DSPS funding was inspired by existing programs in Sun Prairie, Baraboo, and Onalaska. The other will help technical colleges develop structured programs to recognize military service training for educational and licensing requirements for civilian occupations.

Secretary Crim also continued her efforts to modernize the state’s building codes. The Commercial Building Code Council is wrapping up its work to adapt the International Building Council 2021 version of its model code. Secretary Crim also established the Mass Timber Task Force to capture the science and innovation happening in stakeholder laboratories and projects. The goal is to generate a set of guidelines that will facilitate expanded use of mass timber products in Wisconsin commercial buildings.

The department also [received \\$1.65 million from a U.S. Department of Justice grant program](#) to improve and expand access to the Prescription Drug Monitoring Program. Wisconsin’s PDMP is an award-winning resource that puts patient prescription information at the fingertips of health professionals as they make decisions about pain medicines, stimulants, benzodiazepines, and other drugs. The aggregate data and website visualizations are also invaluable to policy makers as they consider the ongoing state response to the opioid epidemic.

“The PDMP is an important part of the state’s multi-faceted efforts to address the opioid epidemic, and we continue to invest in it to make it more accessible and useful for prescribers,” Crim said. “This in turn leads to more robust data and better information for policy makers.”

Also, the department [signed contracts with new vendors to automate portions of the occupational licensing process](#) and [to transition customers away from paper and toward electronic application](#). This will help address the exponential growth in interest in Wisconsin licensed occupations revealed by the increase in application volume the department handles. The department receives an average of 13,280 initial applications and renewals per month, and the number of initial applications has increased by more than 28% since 2017. This does not include the applications for temporary pandemic licenses that the department also processes.

Secretary Crim also shifted the order of an ongoing agency-wide technology modernization project so that health care licensing would be in the next group of upgrades. “We recognize that much of our technology is antiquated, and we cannot operate effectively in our largely paper-based environment,” Crim said. “We also recognize the need to prioritize the needs of the health care workforce, which has been shouldering so much during the pandemic.”

Relatedly, the department also collaborated with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, occupational boards, and industry partners to launch [workforce studies in license renewals for dentists and physicians](#). The data gathered will help DHS access higher levels of federal funding to support areas of the state—typically rural communities—with dental health, mental health, and primary care provider shortages.

“I think the workforce study effort is a great example of the collaborative spirit of our agency,” Secretary Crim said. “We are focused on the work and the impact, not on the credit.

“I’m very proud of our people—all of our employees—for their service to the state, particularly during this difficult year.”