

DSPS: Several State Occupational Boards Support COVID-19 Vaccination, CDC Guidance

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MADISON, Wis. – As Wisconsin leads the nation in its COVID-19 vaccine rollout, several occupational licensing boards administered by the **Department of Safety and Professional Services** have shown their support for the effort and the vaccine itself. So far, the **Medical Examining Board**, the **Board of Nursing**, **Occupational Therapists Affiliated Credentialing Board**, **Controlled Substances Board**, **Massage Therapy and Bodywork Therapy Affiliated Credentialing Board**, the **Athletic Trainers Affiliated Credentialing Board**, **Cosmetology Examining Board**, and the **Professional Engineer Section of the Examining Board of Architects, Landscape Architects, Professional Engineers, Designers and Professional Land Surveyors** have all taken official action at recent meetings.

Communities across Wisconsin have dealt with high levels of disease and emotional distress, and health care providers have been the front line of the pandemic. Surges have overrun some hospitals, taxing existing staff even before the physicians and nurses began falling ill themselves. Health systems reached for new ways to meet growing demand and fill the shifts of sick employees. They hired out-of-state workers with temporary licenses and welcomed back retirees who wanted to be a part of the effort.

Even though hospital employees have had access to vaccines for months now, the demands of the pandemic are still weighing on them mentally and physically. **Peter Kallio**, chair of the Board of Nursing, says a year of operating in pandemic mode and its difficult circumstances puts health care workers at increased risk of burnout. Keeping nurses healthy is front of mind for Kallio and other board members, and the wellbeing of the nursing workforce and their health care colleagues was a primary motivation for passing the motion.

"We moved to encourage all nurses to get their vaccines. It is critically important to have every available nurse healthy in this environment," Kallio said. "We saw what happens during surges where critical staff are overwhelmed and exhausted. When you add nurses who get sick, it makes a bad situation worse."

Kallio says supporting the vaccination also intrinsically aligns with the nursing profession. Nurses, he says, have a professional responsibility to protect the public, and advancing efforts to reach herd immunity—for COVID, experts believe that means between 70 and 85 percent of the population will need to be protected through vaccination or infection—should be a priority.

"We are not going to get through this until a majority of the population is vaccinated," Kallio says. "Our job on the Board of Nursing is to protect the public. We can certainly follow the science and set an example."

Doing so has the potential to make a big impact. As the largest segment of the health care workforce, nurses are familiar providers who have extensive patient contact. This gives them the opportunity to talk about vaccine safety and importance with patients. And patients trust their nurses. For the past 19 years, nursing has topped the list of an annual Gallup poll that ranks the nation's most ethical and honest professions. (Right behind nurses are physicians.) The bottom line is that when providers have these conversations with patients, they can address concerns and help overcome vaccine resistance.

Dr. Sheldon Wasserman is the chair of the Medical Examining Board. He agrees that providers need to be vaccinated to protect their colleagues on the front line, and he agrees that they need to do what they can to assuage concerns patients may have about COVID-19 vaccines or vaccines in general.

"The vaccines are the best thing we have to end this pandemic," he said.

Wasserman adds that he has personally seen the pandemic's toll. He lost a close friend from medical school, and while he has not lost a patient, his patients have lost family members and friends. He has witnessed their suffering, and he has seen the trauma experienced by his colleagues who have had patients die alone in the ICU.

"We are frontline workers for a reason. We are there because we want to help others, and to help others we need to support the vaccine," Wasserman said. "We don't want to see patients die, and we don't want to see them die alone. That's not what we went into medicine for. We are supposed to be healers."

DSPS Secretary-designee Dawn Crim is pleased that so many boards are showing their commitment to public safety and well being by encouraging vaccination, and she commends them for their leadership now and throughout the pandemic.

"We do not have an exact timeline of when we will get back to normal or even an idea of what our new normal will be, but we do know that vaccination is our only way to get to a future that isn't dominated by a pandemic," Crim said. "I have the utmost respect for our boards and board members, and I commend them for their leadership now and throughout the pandemic."

Currently more than sixty percent of Wisconsinites are eligible for vaccination, and everyone will be eligible on April 5.

The Department of Safety and Professional Services issues more than 240 unique licenses, administers dozens of boards and councils that regulate professions, enforces state building codes, runs the state fire prevention program, and maintains the award-winning Wisconsin Enhanced Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, which is a key tool in the multi-faceted public health campaign to stem excessive opioid prescribing. A fee-based agency, the Department of Safety and Professional Services is self-sustaining and receives no general fund tax dollars for its day-to-day operations. With five offices and 250 employees throughout Wisconsin, DSPS collaborates with constituents and stakeholders across a wide range of industries to promote safety and advance the economy.