

Tommy Thompson: UW System pandemic response critical for Wisconsin

Posted on Friday, Jun 25, 2021

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“Having launched a vaccination site at a few campuses, the System did save the state, and I want to say that publicly. The System saved the state, in its responsibility and its actions.”

Those are the words of one of our newest members of the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents, Dr. Ashok Rai, President and CEO of Prevea Health in Green Bay. He made the comments at the regents meeting this month in Milwaukee during a discussion of the role UW System played in combatting the insidious COVID-19 pandemic in our communities.

From providing \$500 tuition credits to nursing and pharmacy students who administered vaccines or worked in health care settings to opening community testing sites to launching community vaccination centers on our campuses — including with Prevea – the UW System saw a need and found a solution.

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You can't imagine how proud I was to hear Dr. Rai's words – and how grateful I was that he said them publicly. What a stirring testament to the students, staff, faculty, deans, chancellors, and everyone else who contributed their time and talent to those initiatives. It could have only happened in Wisconsin.

Through June 5, we administered more than 264,000 doses of the vaccine. Twelve of our universities, in every part of Wisconsin, hosted and facilitated vaccination

sites.

When we stood up these sites starting Jan. 18 with Prevea at UW-Green Bay, the 7-day average of new daily COVID-19 cases was more than 1,900 in Wisconsin and 27 people died. As of Monday, that average was 69 daily cases with zero deaths. That's great news for all of us, and we're glad we could do our part.

We also administered 1.24 million COVID-19 tests on our UW System campus testing sites, as of June 15. In fact, only Wisconsin had a statewide community testing program at the height of the pandemic last fall to help slow the spread of the virus by enabling hundreds of thousands of people to get free and fast COVID-19 tests at our universities. It was a herculean effort, but one that used a great Wisconsin asset – our public universities.

I remember the day we opened our community vaccination site at UW Oshkosh in early March. Through one entrance to the Culver Family Welcome Center, the area's elderly ambled through the Great Hall and into the Grand Ballroom for their vaccinations. They and their loved ones looked relieved and happy. Through another entrance, the region's residents lined up by the dozens for a rapid-results COVID-19 test being administered in a partitioned part of the ballroom. You could see both groups from a single second-floor vantage point — we were at once inoculating the most vulnerable and helping everyone else prevent the spread. It was the kind of image that stays with you and lets you know we are making a difference.

And the students! A total of 1,042 nursing and pharmacy students stepped up to assist in health care settings during some of the darkest days of the pandemic and then administered vaccines this spring. They gained valuable experience and earned a \$500 tuition credit.

Dr. Rai recognizes what the UW System means to the state of Wisconsin. Knowledge producer. Economic driver. Problem solver. We're glad to have helped our communities emerge from the pandemic and look forward to what our future will bring.

— *Thompson is UW System president and served as Wisconsin's 42nd governor.*