

# Hospital vacancy rates still well above pre-pandemic levels despite gains

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Vacancy rates for hospital jobs in Wisconsin have fallen from a recent peak in 2022 but remain well above pre-pandemic levels, a Wisconsin Hospital Association report shows.

The group today is releasing its 2026 Wisconsin Health Care Workforce Report, which shows the state's hospital vacancy rate was 7.2% on Sept. 30, 2024, the latest date covered in the report. That's down from 10% on Sept. 30, 2022, but is more than twice as high as in 2019, when the vacancy rate was 3.4%.

Ann Zenk, senior vice president of workforce and clinical practice for WHA, says hospitals are in a "race against time" even as they're making progress in hiring and retaining workers.

Over the last decade, hospital employment has increased by 23%, the report shows. But overall health care demand is expected to increase 10% by 2040 while the state's working-age population is shrinking, Zenk said in a statement.

"We're growing the workforce, but not fast enough to meet the needs of an aging population," she said.

In addition to putting a strain on the health sector's workforce, these demographic changes in Wisconsin are causing a shift in reimbursement, which WHA spotlights as a challenge for the industry.

Between fiscal years 2016 and 2024, the share of Medicare in the hospital payer mix increased by 5.3% while commercial insurance fell by 4.9%. The report notes 10,000 baby boomers per day are becoming eligible for Medicare, under which reimbursement falls short of the cost of providing care by 26 cents per dollar.

WHA says a 1% shift from commercial insurance to Medicare could cut hospital

revenue in Wisconsin by \$286.7 million, based on fiscal year 2024 data.

“Even the most stringent efforts to cut costs or utilization cannot bridge the gap between reimbursement and the cost of providing care, much less provide the investment necessary to grow the infrastructure and workforce to keep pace with increasing health care demand,” authors wrote.

The report includes a number of recommendations aimed at addressing these challenges, such as efforts to “break down barriers” to being part of the health care workforce. Authors point to “legal, regulatory and payer barriers” as a key issue, urging policymakers and others to make reimbursement models and regulations more flexible.

WHA is calling for ensuring the benefit of any new regulations or requirements outweigh the additional work requirement or barriers to access they create before they’re adopted. And the group wants to address insurance company policies and practices that “unnecessarily” delay and deny care at hospitals.

Other recommendations are focused on boosting educational and occupational pathways, to give more students and apprentices opportunities to get connected with employers, as well as encouraging the use of new technologies and models of care.

That includes telehealth monitoring and at-home recovery care, as well as using AI and simulations for education and other programs. WHA is also calling for changes to state law to “relieve bottlenecks” in the continuum of care by supporting patient and family decision-making.

See the [release](#) and [report](#).