



# KEY ISSUES IN WESTERN WISCONSIN



WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2021



Well-positioned along Wisconsin's Western border, the La Crosse Area draws workers from a tri-state area to fuel its economy. With a population of 119,193, and industry centered in healthcare, higher education, manufacturing, retail and more, La Crosse is an economic destination for our region.

## Workforce Shortage & Economic Recovery

### WORKFORCE

Western Wisconsin businesses are resilient, displaying impressive commitment in the face of an unknown future and sacrificing to keep their doors open and their workers employed. This work is paying off as we see our area's July 2021 unemployment rate hit 3.0% (US Bureau of Labor Statistics). Yet, as our businesses look to grow, evolve, and maintain their services, they cannot due to a severe workforce shortage. It is necessary that the State of Wisconsin look into a continued long-term investment in talent attraction and retention. The \$3 million budgeted for this initiative at the State level is not enough for the impact to be felt in communities such as ours. Our regional businesses agree this issue is paramount. Together they have contributed more than \$200,000 for a regional talent attraction initiative.

**Our ask:** Procure additional funding and support the long-term investment in talent attraction and retention needed to spur economic growth in Western Wisconsin and throughout our state.

### CHILDCARE

The childcare industry in Western Wisconsin has been drastically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. With already low profit margins prior, providers have seen expenses rise for everyday operating costs and for additional supplies such as PPE and cleaning products. In addition, providers have seen a drop in and loss of income stability due to quarantines for providers and families. Low wages, lack of benefits, and increased perception of risk in the profession have contributed to an alarming childcare workforce shortage causing many sites to close classrooms and operate below their capacity. This story of a struggling industry is not unique but it does have unique impact. When parents lose access to childcare, they can't go to work, jeopardizing the stability of their companies. At the scale we're witnessing, the ripples of lost access to childcare are impacting our region's economic vitality.

**Our ask:** Financially incentivize childcare owners (both centers and family) to reopen classrooms, and financially support the increased costs associated with that, including possible wage supplementation as part of a long-term strategy for attracting and retaining high quality care providers.

### HEALTH CARE

The health care Industry is facing significant workforce shortages, exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. High turnover and vacancy rates in entry-level positions inhibit the ability to provide care. The most immediate staffing challenge is the shortage of CNAs at nursing facilities, limiting the number of beds available to patients ready to leave the hospital and enter nursing facilities. This limited number of beds delays discharges from our hospitals, occupying space and staff that should be dedicated to patients. While this issue is longstanding, the pandemic has worsened the situation and added greater strain to facilities already burdened by COVID-19 and care for Afghan refugees, while maintaining regular care.

**Our ask:** Support public policy that breaks down barriers to increasing the number of health care professionals and support solutions to improve the discharge delay issue.

# CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

## BROADBAND ACCESS

The focus on remote work has highlighted the importance of broadband infrastructure and the realities of the digital divide in our communities. The growing remote workforce presents opportunities for jobs around the world to be filled by rural residents if they can access an adequate Internet connection. Businesses, Healthcare, and Educational Systems today rely on quality connectivity as they communicate with customers, patients, and students. In addition, we are witnessing steep competition for talent, driving companies to relocate to areas where people want to make not only a livelihood, but build their lives. To attract and retain employees, communities must focus on delivering the amenities, culture, and lifestyle that talent seeks. To retain and attract residents and businesses, high-speed Internet needs to be both available and affordable. Without it, our rural communities will continue to experience population decline and potential loss of businesses, creating economic challenges for rural Wisconsin.

**Our ask:** Support legislation that provides affordable high-speed Internet to Western Wisconsin, including our rural communities.

## UWL BUILDING PROJECTS

UW-La Crosse requested a new science building in 2010. With the project estimated at \$136 million, UW System required the request be broken into two phases. Phase I of the Prairie Springs Science Center (PSSC) was completed in 2018 for \$82 million. Phase II requests in 2019-21 (\$83 million) and 2021-23 (\$93 million) were not funded by the legislature. The project request for 2023-25 will be \$104 million. It's imperative to complete Phase II before costs increase and Cowley Hall, known for flooding in even small rainfalls, becomes even more unsafe.

Phase II will foster economic growth statewide. College of Science and Health alumni are vital to the state's highly needed STEM workers, and the building is key for UW System's Freshwater Collaborative that will train the next generation of water researchers, establishing Wisconsin as a global leader in water-related science, technology and economic growth. PSSC II includes 30 badly needed science learning spaces consisting of teaching and research labs, classrooms and faculty advising offices. The building of Phase I generated excitement and inspired a generous \$2 million donation from Milwaukee's Paul Fleckenstein Trust and nearly \$1 million from alumni and friends. With strong community support, Phase II promises to generate even more private funding. The Department of Administration (DOA) approved \$5.6 million for architectural and engineering services for Prairie Springs Science Center Phase II in October 2020. The design will be completed by March 2023 and ready for bid when the 2023-25 budget is approved.

**Our ask:** Support and approve funding to complete Phase II of the Prairie Springs Science Center in the 2023-25 budget.

## TRANSPORTATION

Efficient transportation is an essential component of living and working in Western Wisconsin. Our regional airport is one of the core drivers of economic vitality and is essential for our community to thrive and for new businesses to relocate. We encourage additional funding for airport development and infrastructure improvements, and support the pursuit of additional air service options to offer ease of use to the many business flyers in the region. As supply chain issues and inefficiencies persist nationwide, it is imperative that even the smallest delay in transport on a local level be mitigated because of the damages it causes to businesses. We strongly support the development of funding mechanisms to support state and local road improvements. Finally, as a community situated on the Mississippi River, our economy is driven by the commercial and recreational opportunities it supplies, and we ask for a balanced use approach to maintaining and improving the River and its surrounding areas.

**Our ask:** Support funding for airport infrastructure and improved air service options, invest in state and local road improvements, and seek a balanced use approach to the Mississippi River and its surrounding areas.

## TELEHEALTH

**Originating and Distant Site Restrictions** - Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Medicare limited the locations where patients could receive telehealth services and from which providers could administer these services. Prior to COVID-19, telehealth services were restricted to Medicare beneficiaries being provided care in originating sites such as physician offices and hospitals, excluding patient homes, and limited in rural areas, as RHCs and FQHCs were unable to serve as distant sites. Now, flexibilities have allowed patients to be treated in-home via telehealth, waiving the originating site requirements. Waivers have also allowed RHCs and FQHCs to serve as distant sites, making telehealth more accessible in rural and medically underserved areas. **Our ask:** Continue the waiver of originating site requirements, allowing patients to be treated via telehealth anywhere, and continue to allow RHCs and FQHCs to furnish distant site telehealth services.

**Audio-Only Telehealth** - Audio-only telehealth is vital for those facing barriers such as lack of broadband access or lack of technical understanding. In cases where providers deem it equivalent and appropriate, it is beneficial for providers and patients to connect via audio-only telehealth services. **Our ask:** Given technological challenges in some areas and for some patients, when appropriate, allow audio only telehealth services.