

Is Your Healthcare Access at Risk?

Posted on Mar 27, Posted by [Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31](#) Category [Wisconsin](#)



Senator Smith explores the HSHS closure and what it means for preventing other large-scale health system closures in Wisconsin.

EAU CLAIRE - We were hit hard in west central Wisconsin with the announcement that Hospital Sisters Health System (HSHS) would permanently close Sacred Heart Hospital in Eau Claire, St. Joseph's Hospital in Chippewa Falls and all of its Prevea Clinics throughout the region. The announcement happened on January 22nd and the final closing happened March 22nd already. The original 90 day plan quickly turned into 60 days leaving over 40,000 patients with fewer healthcare options.

While we continue brainstorming for how to plug holes left behind by HSHS, we should also consider how the system failed us all.

Many people who contacted me wanted the state to stop HSHS from closing. Since HSHS is a private company, there's nothing that could've prevented them from closing. HSHS made their own decisions based on fiscal viability as a corporation responsible to their investors.



The one thing the state could do was move the \$15 million that had been set aside for HSHS for behavioral health to other area providers to expand vital, stopgap services right now. It's been almost a month and Republicans have refused to release the money.

We have the greatest and most caring medical professionals in the world. The healthcare workers we encounter in a hospital setting are there for all the right reasons. They want you to be comfortable during what can be a very trying time and they want to cure whatever ails you. No question, medical professionals are there to serve. But, can we count on corporations to have the same values and goals? Is it right to rely completely on corporations with our medical needs?

The healthcare system we live under operates through a network of hospitals, clinics and insurance providers. That network relies on compensation for services provided like any other business. That means each of us paying premiums to insurance companies which we expect to pay most, if not all, of the costs charged for care. But it goes deeper than that and can be complicated. Many people have needs that aren't covered easily by an insurance plan or they cannot afford insurance. Then Medicaid is needed.

Medicaid is managed by the state and funded with federal and state funds. Something we can depend on in our healthcare system is that nobody can be turned away if they show up in the Emergency Department. But somebody has to cover the costs and it is always each of us in one form or another. Medicaid is meant to ensure that the aging population, blind and disabled will be covered. Medicaid in Wisconsin also covers children and pregnant women with incomes up to 300% of poverty and other adults with incomes up to 100% of poverty. But that still leaves nearly 90,000 people in our state without any coverage at all. It's been over 10 years that Republicans have failed to fully expand Medicaid, and Wisconsin has lost billions of dollars.



Hospitals are under pressure to serve everyone despite the fact that Medicaid reimbursement is too low to cover costs. Fully expanding Medicaid may not be the savior that prevents these hospital closures, but Wisconsin is forgoing billions of dollars that could help for purely ideological reasons.

These closures may be the first on this scale in Wisconsin, but they will not be the last if we do not take necessary steps to protect our healthcare system. I've requested a Legislative Study Committee to look specifically into hospital closures and dive into what we can do to prevent this from happening again.

HSHS took on the tough health care needs for our community – drug and alcohol abuse, emergency mental health care and served a high percentage of Medicaid recipients for many years. These services may not be profitable, but they're necessary. Area providers or new ones must be willing to fill the need. Our region needs a strong commitment to serve the community.

Looking even further to the future we need to consider if an overhaul of our system is needed and how we get to a place where nobody is left wondering if they can get the care they need when they need it.

Senator Smith represents District 31 in the Wisconsin State Senate. The 31st Senate District includes all of Buffalo, Pepin and Trempealeau counties and portions of Pierce, Dunn, Eau Claire, Jackson and St. Croix counties.

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