

It Seems To Me: Don't Limit HSHS Crisis Funding

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31

Wednesday, 28 February 2024 09:47 - Last Updated Wednesday, 28 February 2024 11:49

<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/healthcare-family-dr-s440.jpg>



Sen. Smith and Rep. Emerson examine the challenges presented by the recent HSHS closures in the Chippewa Valley and the importance of maintaining flexibility with the \$15 million approved by the legislature.

EAU CLAIRE - The announcement that HSHS was closing Both Sacred Heart and St. Joseph's Hospitals by April 21st came as a surprise to everyone in the Chippewa Valley.

Thankfully, all of us have pulled together to solve this crisis. The rapid departure of HSHS leaves Chippewa Valley communities reeling from 2 hospital closures, 19 clinic closures, 1,600 people unemployed and over 40,000 patients wondering how their healthcare needs will be filled.

Everyone felt the urgency when the Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce managed to pull together a meeting of officials and professionals to brainstorm what the next moves would be to fill the void left behind.

Bipartisan agreement was found to transfer the unused \$15 million from HSHS for expanding behavioral health to other area providers. However, the disagreement is whether we should restrict them while responding to this crisis. It's like showing up to a fire and we all agree to turn on the water, but some think a garden hose will do the trick instead of letting the

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firefighters use what they need.

We did our homework from the start by talking to the healthcare providers in the area that are trying to figure out how to pick up the pieces. We met with officials from Oakleaf, Marshfield, Mayo and even HSHS to learn what we could do to help. We connected them with state agencies to answer questions and determine ways to implement services easier and faster. We connected with the Department of Justice, the Department of Health Services, the Department of Safety & Professional Services as well as the Department of Administration.



We learned that the greatest needs include expediting licensing and expanding urgent care, obstetrics, behavioral health, dialysis, and even primary care services. Most importantly, we learned we needed to prevent losing valuable medical professionals who were employed by HSHS. Even if other hospitals and clinics physically expand they won't be able to provide the services needed without the personnel. Bricks can't take a pulse and drywall can't perform dialysis.

Colleagues of ours hurriedly put together two bills, Senate Bill 1014 (BS 1014) and Senate Bill 1015 (SB 1015) – SB 1015 reappropriates the \$15 million; SB 1014 limits the funds only to emergency room construction, but not for medical personnel to staff it. If the authors of the bill would've done their homework like we did, they would've understood the importance of keeping these funds flexible.

Patients and health care providers shouldn't have to wait for political maneuvers. This is a crisis and the funds should be immediate and flexible.

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After the bills were introduced and public hearings held, we introduced amendments to the bills to remove the restrictions. We approached area Republicans with a solution but they failed to get their Republican colleagues behind the much needed changes based on area healthcare providers.

Simply put, we would be better off if the restrictions in SB 1014 don't become law – promising \$15 million with no realistic way to use it is foolish. This is an unusual case when doing something is worse than doing nothing. If the bill sent to the governor were to be signed into law, the Chippewa Valley will be back at square one with a lot of wasted effort for no gain.

Written by Senator Jeff Smith & Representative Jodi Emerson.

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.