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2025 ISSUES

Regional Priority:

Healthcare

The 2024 closures of all HSHS Hospitals and Prevea clinics in our area created an unprecedented healthcare crisis for our region... affecting patients, healthcare professionals and their families, and the entire local economy. All segments of our community have come together in a Task Force to identify and understand the numerous complex issues that must be addressed, and have undertaken a robust, collaborative effort develop plans and take prompt action to solve this crisis.

The State of Wisconsin has an important role to play, not only in assisting with immediate needs, but in addressing long-term issues related to the sustainability of the current healthcare funding model. Those issues are not unique to the Chippewa Valley and could precipitate similar crises in other areas if not dealt with.

♥ *Thank you*

- **Funding for regional crisis mental health centers.** We appreciate state legislation that provides funding for regional crisis mental health centers. With the loss of HSHS-provided mental health beds, local governments are forced to spend significant time and expense to transfer individuals to the Winnebago Mental Health Institute in Oshkosh. Now, it's important to accelerate the regulatory and procurement process for a center to be located to directly serve the Chippewa Valley.

★ *Action Requested*

- **Address the impact of hospital and clinic closures,** including lack of mental health and emergency services, as well as the vulnerability that we could see more disruption in local and rural healthcare. Consider potential structural changes to the healthcare system, improve cost transparency, address inadequate Medicaid reimbursement, and encourage innovation through initiatives led by UWEC, CVTC, and others.
- **Resolve the conflict over the \$15 million stopgap funding for the Chippewa Valley.** Although this funding was appropriated in 2024 to address immediate service deficiencies, it was left in limbo because of disagreements between the administration and the legislature. It's important for both sides to come together to apply this funding as soon as possible to emergency services and mental health deficiencies that have specifically affected the Chippewa Valley.
- **Facilitate coordination of EMS services** in the region to address service availability and response resources.

Regional Priority:

Education

♥ *Thank You*

- Implementation of state capital funding enacted in the 2023-25 budget for the UWEC Science and Health Sciences Building and UW-Stout's Heritage Hall renovation are valuable investments for our state's economy. These institutions of higher learning in the Chippewa Valley's, including Chippewa Valley Technical College, have positioned themselves effectively to meet the future workforce and educational needs of our economy, as well as to stabilize and grow enrollment in a challenging demographic environment.

★ *Action requested*

- **Ensure adequate funding to continue the growth of dual credit programs in Wisconsin high schools** through partnerships with technical colleges such as CVTC and with the Universities of Wisconsin. These programs have saved parents millions of dollars in tuition and provided accelerated opportunities for high school students to achieve college credit and even degrees, providing additional benefits in reducing workforce challenges. In 2023, for example, 6,434 students from 55 area school districts earned credits, a tuition savings of \$3.8 million.
- **Significantly improve Wisconsin's ranking in public support for the Universities of Wisconsin**, which currently ranks 43rd out of 50 states, far behind neighbors like Iowa, Illinois, and Minnesota. It's critical for our economic future that our universities remain competitive in attracting faculty and providing students with an effective academic experience.
 - For UW-Stout, supporting polytechnic learning experiences - internships, cooperative work experiences, and industry-sponsored projects supervised by faculty and staff; and preparing students for the workforce by providing three times as many labs as classrooms, engaging with professional equipment and technology, and offering essential student counseling services.
 - For UW-Eau Claire, providing connections between Career Counselors and businesses; establishing a new Healthcare Education Network to coordinate research, scholarships, pre-medical and pre-professional support, and learning opportunities for students across high-demand healthcare career fields.
- **Support the Technical College System's budget request** to sustain its cost-effective, employer-driven, and student-responsive educational programs. As enrollments rebound rapidly post-COVID, institutions like CVTC are leading in initiatives that reduce costs for students, such as open educational resources (OER), while investing in high-cost, essential programs like healthcare, manufacturing, and public safety that are critical to Wisconsin's workforce. Additionally, CVTC is leveraging cutting-edge AI technology to address workforce demands and enhance instruction and operations. This funding is essential to ensure all eligible technical college students can access Wisconsin grants without being turned away due to insufficient resources.
- **Approve bonding authority for the UW-Stout Recreation Complex Renovation.** Stout plans to renovate and expand its Recreation Center with \$31.7 million funded entirely with donor support and student-approved fees, without the use of taxpayer dollars. In addition to providing enhanced student health and wellness, the renovation of the facility will benefit other partners including area youth and private industry.

Regional Priority:

Economic Development and Tax Reform

♥ *Thank You*

- **2024 legislation updating state tax credit incentives** to provide opportunities to companies to qualify based upon job retention and/or capital investments, rather than strictly job creation.

★ *Action Requested*

- **Consider tax reform initiatives to eliminate or significantly decrease the state's income tax burden.** This would enhance the state's competitiveness and ability to attract and retain talent, while potentially providing an opportunity

to address other tax fairness issues without jeopardizing overall state revenues and essential services. We encourage the Legislature and the Governor to come to terms on tax reductions that will benefit the largest portion of state income tax payers.

- **Address the impact of the increasing number of referendums** on the property tax burden but also the constraints and challenges local governments face in responding to increased demands on essential services resulting from inflation and growth. Localities should be in a position to benefit from growing revenues when local sales tax collections increase. Address formula inequities in shared revenue and school aid. Consider providing more flexibility to local governments, such as inflationary adjustments and the ability to consider enacting local sales vs. property tax increases
- **Modernize Tax Increment Financing (TIF).** As the primary tool available to local economic developers, it's important to ensure its rules are structured to provide the most economic benefit. There is a need to modernize current regulations to incentivize more housing supply and affordability, and provide careful relief from the cap of 12% of the equalized value in a community. Significantly increase the amount of residential development that can qualify, especially for workforce housing; and consider raising the 12% cap and eliminating the cap for PAYGO projects where no up-front funds are provided by the municipality.
- **Establish and fund the Office of Outdoor Recreation as a permanent part of the Department of Tourism.** With the recent analysis by the US Bureau of Economic Analysis showing a record, growing economic impact of outdoor recreation for Wisconsin's economy - \$11.2 billion in 2023 - it's important to continue the progress already achieved. With significant outdoor assets, the Chippewa Valley directly benefits from the tools and support provided by this office.

Regional Priority:

Workforce Development

♥ *Thank You*

- **Creation of WEDC's Wisconsin Community Ambassador Talent Attraction Program.** This program, launched in 2024 by the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC), establishes partnerships with national providers and local Wisconsin communities to attract new workers to Wisconsin. It establishes a personal connection for potential Wisconsinites ensuring a smooth transition for relocation to help meet our state's need for skilled workers.
- **Implementation of Legislation investing \$525 million to address housing supply and affordability.** Key progress was made in 2023 with legislation enacted to ensure local compliance with comprehensive plans, along with the four affordable housing programs established at the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (WHEDA). The latter include creating a residential housing infrastructure revolving loan fund program, creating a main street housing rehabilitation revolving loan fund program, and creating a loan program for developers converting commercial buildings into residential ones. *We support technical modifications to the bills as needed to ensure that the funds are deployed to meet their intended impact.*

★ *Action Requested*

- **Address the childcare crisis.** The availability and affordability of childcare has become an increasingly acute issue for employers, families, and childcare providers. It has inhibited the ability of families to take full advantage of employment opportunities and for employers to have full access to the potential talent pool. What's more, childcare providers are faced with a business model that makes it challenging to pay competitive wages and deal with regulatory hurdles. Covid relief funding has provided stopgap assistance to maintain some capacity, but is temporary and inadequate to provide a long-term solution.

There is an urgent need for innovation on the part of the state to address the funding, business model, and regulatory oversight of early childhood care and education in ways that will effectively deal with availability, affordability, and accountability for quality and safety. This by necessity must address the business model for childcare providers, especially in their ability to attract and retain motivated, high-quality staff.

This issue has engendered much debate and potential legislation. We continue to encourage all parties to come together to provide meaningful and practical solutions to these issues. We also urge consideration of further incentives for employers and parents to help with child care expenses.

- **Continue to address housing supply and affordability.** Wisconsin's housing shortage across all levels is closely related to the workforce crisis, as well as having a detrimental effect on affordability. State policies, regulations and statutes should encourage infill development, creation of missing middle housing types, compact growth, efficiency of public resources, and the ability to build the types of housing demanded by the marketplace. Ensure the effective implementation of Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (WHEDA) programs and funding, ensure fairness and adequate funding for Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) programs, and work to eliminate regulatory barriers that artificially inhibit market demand.

♥★ *Continued progress needed*

- **Eliminate backlogs in occupational licensing.** The Department of Safety and Professional Services must continue to take steps to eliminate the backlogs, as professionals in many occupations have reported significant delays in receiving credentials from DSPS, hampering their ability to work and earn a living. It's important for DSPS to take steps to improve the management of these functions to be responsive to the needs of these professions. In the 2023-25 State budget, the legislature passed and Gov. Evers signed measures to provide additional DSPS staff to help expedite licensure. More progress needs to be made so that licenses can be processed in a timely manner.

Regional Priority:

Homelessness

Cities across Wisconsin are experiencing a growing crisis related to homelessness, affected by housing costs, mental health and substance abuse disorders, challenges in providing and funding needed services, and the need for better coordination of strategies to address the issue. While communities like Eau Claire are organizing to tackle the problem in a collaborative, comprehensive way, there is a state role in addressing common issues and their impact irrespective of jurisdictional boundaries.

♥ *Thank you*

- **Wisconsin's successful application for a federal waiver to allow the use of Medicaid funding for housing support services.** This program will benefit local community efforts to successfully provide housing to Medicaid recipients who are affected by substance abuse or mental health conditions.

★ *Action requested*

- **Provide and effectively deploy state and federal resources** for regional support systems to address issues like mental health, addiction treatment, and affordable housing programs. Work across the state to share and assist in the implementation of successful strategies to provide housing first opportunities that include critical support services.
- **Ensure coordination across jurisdictions** to avoid relocations of unsheltered individuals without proper coordination and support with local agencies.

Regional Priority:

Transportation/infrastructure

♥ *Thank you*

- **Electric Vehicle Charging Network:** Thank you for the passage of legislation in 2024 that addressed state regulatory issues and unlocked \$78 million in federal funding for the placement of elective vehicle (EV) charging stations along the state's highway network. These stations are now coming online with two of the first ones being placed in Chippewa Falls and Menomonie.

★ *Action Requested*

- **Passenger Rail: Ensure the required 10% match to continue passenger rail studies** to potentially expand train service to more communities across the state, including the Chippewa Valley. Strong ridership on the newly-implemented Borealis train to the Twin Cities via La Crosse demonstrates the pent-up demand for train service in Wisconsin. We appreciate the commitment that the state has made to the future mobility needs of our citizens and economic health of our communities through its participation and support of Step 1 Scoping studies underway for six Wisconsin corridors in the Federal Railroad Administration's (FRA) Corridor Identification and Development Program (CID). For our area, WisDOT is studying the Chicago-Milwaukee-Madison-Eau Claire-Twin Cities route and the local Chippewa-St. Croix Rail Commission is studying the regional Eau Claire-Twin Cities corridor with WisDOT's support and coordination.

With the initial studies to be completed in 2025, it will be critical for all of these corridors to move into the Step 2, Service Development Plans (SDPs), which qualify for a 90% federal match. These plans are the heart of the program to provide the information necessary to identify the costs, benefits, value, and return on investment to determine the feasibility of these corridors.

Furthermore, the Chippewa-St. Croix Commission's proposed corridor contemplates key innovations including a competitive process for selecting an operator, applying a direct access model for use of track capacity on host railroad Union Pacific, and inclusion of transportation oriented economic development. These innovations could provide significant benefits in cost effectiveness, reduced upfront capital requirements, and local economic development impact.

- **Release the \$125 million appropriated for PFAS remediation.** Although the 2023-25 budget set aside \$125 million to help local governments and landowners clean up PFAS contamination, its release has been held up by disputes between the administration and legislature over the DNR's authority and potential liability for landowners who didn't cause the contamination. In the meantime, many localities have committed significant funding to PFAS remediation. It's important for Democrats and Republicans to work together to resolve this issues and make this funding available.

Energy

Energy independence and reliability. The investor-owned utilities and electric cooperatives serving the Chippewa Valley have demonstrated responsible leadership in working towards renewable energy and reduced carbon emission goals, while at the same time meeting responsibilities to for cost-effectiveness and reliability. It's important for state policies to recognize and support this balance.

★ *Action requested*

- **Support Right of First Refusal (ROFR) legislation for Wisconsin companies to build electric transmission lines in the state.** Providing local utilities with the right to retain control the safety and reliability of the power grid will also benefit Wisconsin energy consumers when local companies build, operate, and maintain transmission projects. Despite the arguments of opponents, the legislation continues to require competitive bidding for the engineering, procurement, and construction of transmission lines; maintains cost benefits from being part of the Midcontinent Independent System Operator (MISO) system; and keeps oversight regulation by the state Public Service Commission.