

WVIA

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

November 15, 2023

Legislative Wrap-Up of November Interim Meetings in Wheeling

Another round of interim meetings just wrapped up this week, and this month the Legislature took their show on the road to Wheeling. Most of the meetings were held at either The Health Plan office or Oglebay Resort. Below is a summary of the key action.

DHHR Reorganization

Lawmakers continue to focus on DHHR reorganization. The 3 new cabinet secretaries provided an update on the transition efforts which take effect January 1, 2024. The Department will be split into 3 separate agencies: departments of Health; Human Services; and Health Facilities. Most of the focus during interims has been on personnel issues to align with the restructuring.

- Dr. Sherri Young, who currently serves as the DHHR's Interim Secretary, but will soon take the position of Secretary for the newly created Department of Health, noted that a specific concern is being able to fill positions vacated by future retirees, noting that 53% of DHHR employees will be eligible for retirement in 2029. Also, there are 171 vacancies in the Bureau for Public Health – *alone*, most of which are nurses and social workers who will be eligible for retirement within the next 5 years. While DHHR is working to recruit employees to fill positions, they're also considering whether to keep certain positions, and this is across the board through the 3 agencies.
- Dr. Cynthia Persily, incoming Secretary of the Department of Human Services discussed vacancies in her department. She noted they've identified 40 positions no longer necessary within the various bureaus within the department. These are bureaus such as Medicaid, Family Assistance, Behavioral Health, and Social Services to name a few. She said the budget request during the upcoming session will include using a portion of funds that are being saved by those 40 positions to provide salary increases in specific classifications. Persily also said they are looking at all contracts the Department has in place with external organizations, and looking at whether they're meeting the scope of work that was designated in the contract. Some of the other areas of focus include Medicaid unwinding and rate setting, as well as the Managed Care RFQ which is set for December.
- Michael Caruso, incoming Secretary of the Department of Health Facilities noted he's overseeing 7 state hospitals, and 511 long term care beds. His staff have been reviewing financial statements with the goal of ensuring hospital operations align with industry standards. Caruso said they are also looking at personnel efficiencies and reallocating financial savings from eliminated positions.

Finally, the 3 new cabinet secretaries have also been working to develop a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to establish a new Office of Shared Administration. This Office, which is part of the reorg process, will provide shared services from centralized units such as finance, HR, management information services, and constituent services. According to the secretaries, this has been one of the most difficult parts of reorg since departments often need their own administrators with specific knowledge of DHHR programs. This is a particular concern in grant writing, where specific knowledge of agency funding is critical.

EMS Update

Jody Ratcliff, Director of the WV Office of EMS presented additional data on the staffing needs to support EMS across the state.

According to the data, West Virginia has about 1,600 active emergency medical workers, but needs at least 2,500 to meet current staffing needs. That number is the minimum and it assumes everyone works 24-hour shifts and no one takes a day off. An ideal number would be 5,000 to support 911 and transport needs 24/7/365. Ratliff also told lawmakers that EMS crews were called out over 1 million times last year. Of those calls, less than half resulted in reimbursable hospital transports. In West Virginia, EMS crews are dispatched on average every 48 seconds, with 911 responses coming about every two minutes. They handle 122 interfacility transports and 404 medical transports a day.

The committee asked about issues driving the shortage including salary/benefits as well as variations in how local counties support their local EMS. In addition, the committee discussed several related topics including: 1) how mutual aid works between the counties and barriers that may limit a county in responding to a request due to limited resources in the home county; 2) the location and distribution of EMS providers, and how data provided by WVOEMS can assist in planning/predicting the location of 90% of future calls; and 3) the challenge of low reimbursement and inappropriate use of 911 services by frequent flyers for non-emergency situations.

Moving forward, lawmakers will continue to look for a permanent funding solution directed to EMS rather than a one-time allocation that was made during a special session earlier this year....so this topic is sure to spill over into the Regular Session.

Other topics

- Legislators heard from the Executive Director of the West Virginia Association of Health Plans. The focus was on **drug treatment throughout the state**, and it was reported that the number of Medicaid-approved beds available for drug treatment in the state has increased from 648 in July 2019, to roughly 1,600 today. He also described how health plan providers currently want to choose which facilities they will reimburse based on the care provided and the outcomes of those patients. This will be something to watch as legislators continue to discuss the number of licensed residential treatment beds in West Virginia.
- Executives from **Orchard Park Hospital** in Wheeling also spoke to legislators about their recently opened facility that provides inpatient acute psychiatric care to adolescents. Since opening in late September, they have averaged roughly 5 youths a day at the facility, with as many as 8 at one time.

The next round of legislative interim meetings is December 10-12 in Charleston at the Capitol. If you have any questions regarding this month's meetings, please contact me at tgregory@wvha.org or 304-545-0128.

Tony