

**West Virginia Hospitals: The Heartbeat of a Community**  
**By Jim Kaufman, President and CEO West Virginia Hospital Association**

The mission of all hospitals regardless of size and location, is to provide quality care to patients and advance health in their communities. In West Virginia, we are blessed to have a network of topnotch hospitals throughout the Mountain State. Large academic medical centers and teaching hospitals, regional and community hospitals, critical access hospitals, and specialty and behavioral health hospitals are all working together to ensure access to care and provide high-quality services close to home.

Many of the health care workforce representing West Virginia hospitals will attend Hospital Day at the Legislature on Thursday, February 8. On the agenda: expressing our appreciation to the Legislature and Governor Justice for their vision and leadership in supporting the hospital industry in West Virginia and promoting new opportunities to partner with them to improve access to care.

Over the past several years, Governor Justice and the Legislature have provided vital support to hospitals through a host of initiatives. These efforts have included the “Save Our Care” initiative which provided critical funding for staffing during the height of the public health emergency; the “Nursing Workforce Expansion Program” that supported education programs across the state to address staffing shortages; legislation that improved PEIA payment rates closer to the cost of care for hospitals and physicians; and critical funding to enhance telehealth services through the state’s Telestroke program, to name just a few topics.

Today, as policymakers grapple with a host of complex issues during the Legislative Session, we know the Governor and Legislature will continue to look for ways to support the heartbeat of every community - their local hospitals. Recently, Governor Justice announced efforts to provide critically needed infrastructure support to hospitals to assist with updating equipment and facilities. Also, there is legislation advancing to update a key Medicaid supplemental payment program that will allow the infusion of additional federal funds to the state, along with bills advancing in the Legislature to provide protections against discriminatory practices from the pharmaceutical industry, and to provide enhanced protections for our health care workers and first responders. These are just a few examples of our Governor and Legislature’s commitment to support our hospitals.

These collective efforts are an acknowledgement that hospitals continue to face a multitude of challenges - from historic inflation driving up the cost of medical supplies and equipment - to critical workforce shortages. For example, between 2019 and 2022, hospitals experienced a 21 percent increase in medical supplies and a 37 percent increase for pharmaceutical costs. Moreover, sustained demand for care for patients coming to the hospital sicker and staying longer has exacerbated these challenges, as hospitals in West Virginia are only able to staff two thirds of the licensed beds in the state due to a severe national shortage of health care providers.

Ensuring access to care is priority number one for hospitals. We do not want to suffer the fate of communities across the country who have witnessed firsthand the challenges of when a hospital closes. For these communities, a hospital closure does not only mean a loss of timely access to care, but it also means the entire community suffers a major, catastrophic economic blow as hospitals are often the largest private employer and major economic engines for their communities.

West Virginia hospitals are foundational economic pillars in our communities. We drive \$12.5 billion in economic activity throughout the Mountain State and directly employ 53,000 compassionate caregivers. The state's future economic success is dependent upon sustaining a vibrant, financially strong, and technologically advanced health care system ready to deliver high-quality modern health care services today and into the future.

Further, West Virginia hospitals contribute more than \$1 billion in direct community benefit. This amount reflects the total community benefit hospitals provide including investments in community programs, education as well as the cost of charity care and bad debt. Community programs and education alone – West Virginia hospitals provide \$102 million in free resources and support to their communities.

These figures reinforce the connection between West Virginia's economy and the role of West Virginia's hospitals as economic drivers and a critical cornerstone for comprehensive health care services in the State. Beyond the statistics, there are countless examples of hospitals and caregivers saving lives, treating injuries and illnesses, and supporting the health of their communities. Hospitals cannot do this alone, and we appreciate the dedicated support and leadership of Governor Justice, Senate President Craig Blair, House Speaker Roger Hanshaw, and the entire Legislature for their recognition that West Virginia needs strong hospitals so we can have healthy and thriving communities.