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STATE SENATOR

Op-Ed: Improving Your Access to Quality Health Care

Busy and productive – those two words describe the Senate Health and Human Services Committee that I chair. We’ve held several hearings and have cast votes on a number of bills that will improve your access to quality health care. I’d like to draw attention to four in particular that relate to telemedicine, CNA training, and interstate compacts.

All of us have been in situations where we’ve felt ill, but have been unsure of what to do. In that circumstance, telemedicine can be a helpful tool. People across Wisconsin have used telehealth systems, like the Mayo Health System nurse line, to access information, advice, and care with the touch of a button.

Last week, we heard testimony on Senate Bill 380, which helps telemedicine increase access for patients by requiring Medicaid to treat it the same as in-person services in terms of patient coverage and provider reimbursement. The bill also increases the number of telehealth services that Medicaid covers, allows Medicaid patients to receive telehealth directly in their homes, and removes barriers to expansion. I plan to schedule a committee vote on this bi-partisan bill in the coming weeks.

Another way to improve health care access is to increase the number of health care workers. Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs), or Nurse Aides, provide essential services to elderly and disabled citizens in our communities. However, recruitment and retention of CNAs can be difficult in today's competitive workforce climate. Senate Bill 103 will help facilities like Morrow Home in Sparta and others across the district reach their optimal staffing levels by changing Wisconsin's training requirements to match those established at the federal level. By making this change, we expect to remove some barriers to entry for the profession while maintaining an excellent standard for care. We passed this bill in committee, and it is now ready for a full vote in the State Senate.

Interstate compacts can also help improve access to health care professionals. Rep. Nancy VanderMeer authored the first Interstate Medical Licensure Compact in 2015, and I’ve worked with her this session on Senate Bill 74, which will make it permanent. This Compact helps reduce red tape and speeds up the licensure process for physicians in other states who would like to serve patients in Wisconsin. So far, nearly 400 have gone through that process. The bill to make the Compact permanent has passed the Senate, and I’m confident that it will move through the Assembly soon.

Seeing the success of the Interstate Medical Licensure Compact, Senator Howard Marklein has authored Senate Bill 390, the Physical Therapy Licensure Compact. This bill would improve access to physical therapy, and make it easier for new physical therapists to move to and practice here in Wisconsin. We heard this bill in committee earlier this month, and I plan to hold a committee vote on the bill before the end of the month.

Each of these bills makes it easier for people in Central and Western Wisconsin to access the health care that we need at the quality we expect. I will continue to use my role as Chairman of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee to enhance health care opportunities in our region and across the state