



The Award Goes To

Dr. James F. Bush

Retired Medicaid medical director recognized by Wyoming Medical Society as 2023 Physician of the Year

BY GAYLE M. IRWIN



PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. JIM BUSH Dr. Jim Bush visited Pompeii, Italy, after retiring in the spring.

Jim Bush, MD, spent more than 40 years in the field of medicine, including almost 16 with the Wyoming Department of Health as the state's Medicaid medical director. He retired from his position and from the field of medicine in early 2023, and in September, he was presented with the Physician of the Year Award by the Wyoming Medical Society.

"I was absolutely astounded," he said about receiving the award. "I never expected they'd give it to someone who was the Medicaid director. It was quite an honor."

Dr. Bush is noted for his commitment to medicine, patients, and the state of Wyoming, and many of his former colleagues hailed the recognition.

"I had the good fortune to work as a colleague with Dr. Bush for 11 years at the Department of Health," said Lee Grossman, state Medicaid agent. "His passion for quality patient care was unmatched. If he knew care could be improved, there is no one he would not personally call. That personal investment in each case is what I always remember about my time with Dr. Bush. His drive inspired me and continues to inspire those he worked with in state government."

"Dr. Bush has always been a forward thinker," said Tim Caswell, Medicaid data warehouse manager. "He would always talk about how he tracked his patients with specific conditions in spreadsheets so he could track their improvements, and this was before EHRs were available. He then brought that same mind thought to the state of Wyoming to try and improve Medicaid members' health outcomes by implementing improvement programs. As a man that wore many hats, he

was able to bring different programs together to focus on the same goal, which would end up benefiting Medicaid members as well as all of the other patients that a provider may see in their clinic."

Joins Wyoming Medicaid to fix system flaws

Dr. Bush began his work in Wyoming as the Medicaid medical director in 2007. He spent the next 16 years looking for ways to improve the system. He also served as a staff physician for the Wyoming Department of Health, reviewing cases for the state. He said his general response was, "It's cheaper to do it right the first time."

He came from more than 24 years in private practice as an internist in Fort Collins. He opened his solo practice in 1983.

"I was told I was a dinosaur even then," Dr. Bush said. "People said, 'That model won't last forever.' I said, 'Well, we can try.' It worked for 24 years. I had a great practice, and I had a great time."

Yet, he saw flaws in the system, especially in Medicaid.

"Organized medicine has always been very important to me," he said.

He went to Washington, DC, and lobbied Congress "to support primary care," and his experiences with Colorado Medicaid were not positive.

"I actually got two checks for one cent. Finally, I just stopped charging Colorado Medicaid and just wrote those off as tax-charitable deductions," Dr. Bush said.

"As I was approaching 52, I could see the handwriting on the wall" regarding Medicare and Medicaid and "hospitals

absorbing medical practices, and then here come the EHRs,” he said.

“When I started internal medicine in Fort Collins, we had 11 independent internists in that city. There aren’t any left,” said Dr. Bush. “When I saw this opportunity to apply to Wyoming as the Medicaid medical director, I said, ‘Maybe I could do more good, effect more change, by joining the government and interjecting my clinical experiences, not just clinical, but my business experiences.’”

Mental and physical care via telehealth

One aspect of improvement he brought to the Wyoming Medicaid program was telehealth. A value he saw was eliminating the barrier of distance.

“It was just barely getting going,” he said, referring to telehealth. “Years ago, I changed the rules saying, ‘Anything that’s clinically appropriate being done via telehealth, we will pay the same as in person.’”

That included mental health appointments, internal medicine, family practice, obstetrics, and other physical health visits, he said.

Although telehealth appointment expenditures rose significantly over the years, the overall expenses for the Medicaid department did not increase, Dr. Bush stated.

“We were just replacing in-person visits with telehealth visits,” he said. “It really helped our physicians and our patients during the pandemic years. I always believed we should use technology to overcome the geographical, low population barriers of our state.”

“Dr. Bush was really passionate about leveraging and improving telehealth in Wyoming,” said Stefan Johannson, director of the Wyoming Department of Health. “Dr. Bush saw early on, even long before I was here, that the state of Wyoming and the Department of Health could really be a thought leader in some of these areas, not only improving quality for the people that we serve, the members on Medicaid, the patients that we serve, but also improve the state’s ability to manage a really large, basically health insurance plan. He was the bedrock of the telehealth consortium that still exists today.”

That consortium, the Wyoming Telehealth Consortium, was chaired by Dr. Bush. From 2009 to 2023, he wrote policy recommendations to guide the use of telemedicine in primary care. Because of his commitment to patient care via telehealth, a legacy award was established.

“They did, without input from me, mind you, implement the Dr. James Bush Annual Award for Excellence in Promoting Telehealth,” Dr. Bush said.

The first recipient to receive the award was Cheyenne

Regional Hospital’s telehealth program manager Kevin Smith in 2022. The award is given to an individual or organization that has accomplished outstanding work in the field of telehealth.

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In addition to writing policy, Dr. Bush wrote several other papers during his time in Wyoming, including “Medicaid Expansion: Premium Assistance and Other Options, Stemming the Escalating Cost of Prescription Drugs,” and “The Integration of Care for Mental Health, Substance Abuse, and other Behavioral Health Conditions into Primary Care.”

Addressing mental health issues in Wyoming’s youth was an area Dr. Bush took great interest in and desired to see improvement, something he believed happened while he worked in the Medicaid office.

“Our entire state is a mental health shortage area,” he said. “We bounced between three and four board-certified child psychologists. I reached out to Seattle, because Seattle is our medical school. We worked out a contract with them [for youth telehealth evaluations].”

In 2014, Dr. Bush spoke at a Center for Healthcare Strategies conference on the topic of reducing childhood use of psychotropic medications. During his talk, Dr. Bush outlined the most significant problem facing Wyoming youth with mental and behavioral health problems, especially those in foster care settings. From 2008 to 2010, more children entered foster care and mental health systems at higher costs than previous year; a 54 percent increase in psychiatric residential treatment facility bed days. He also highlighted the lack of child/adolescent psychiatrists serving the entire state: only six at that time. Studies also found Wyoming children in foster care and in residential placements were on more drugs, at higher doses, at younger ages, and that the majority of primary care physicians felt they could not meet the mental health needs of their young patients, and that even more felt they could not consult with a mental health specialist in a reasonable length of time. Working with other professionals in other states in a partnership arrangement helped course-correct these situations, in particular through the Provider Assistance Line



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contract with academic center-affiliated child psychiatrists and Seattle Children's Hospital.

Studies from 2011 to 2013 provided encouraging results. In addition to a more rapid response to help the child, the state saw significant cost savings: \$29,547 per child over six months.

"This model is going all around the country now," Dr. Bush said. "I've been really proud of what I did to improve children's mental health."

Caring for state funds and residents, especially the vulnerable

He took his job of saving the state money seriously, however, not at the expense of a patient's quality of life. He approved new and developing treatments if he believed those would ultimately help the patient and save the state money.

For example, for a child spending much of his time in a hospital's intensive care unit due to seizures, Dr. Bush approved use of an "orphan drug" that didn't have FDA approval yet. He decided to allow the medication to be used because he found "10 years of European articles showing the use of that drug for that reason" and that research compelled him to approve the drug for this youngster.

"I don't think he had any more hospitalizations that I'm aware of," Dr. Bush said. "Even though we used state general funds, we saved the state money. I have a fiduciary responsibility to the people of the state, but I have a clinical responsibility to do what's right."

He also recalled a 2-year-old girl whose internal organs didn't develop properly. She wasn't growing normally and she experienced jaundice.

"I said, 'If we don't do the right thing, she's going to die,'" Dr. Bush remembered saying.

After various medical treatments, she began thriving, "plump and red-cheeked, growing pretty normally," Dr. Bush said.

"If you can do the right thing first, you get better outcomes and bigger savings," he said.

His clinical experience as a physician and his business experience as a solopreneur blended well in his position as Wyoming's Medicaid medical director. He often made time to talk to state physicians before making decisions and therefore, established relationships with Wyoming doctors.

"The doctors were really pleased that I would reach out to them and talk to them, even if I didn't approve [their request] and have a courteous, respectful conversation with them," he said. "I wanted to support our physicians, I wanted to support our patients, and make it easy. I can't say how many docs said Medicaid was their favorite payor because we were easy to work with."

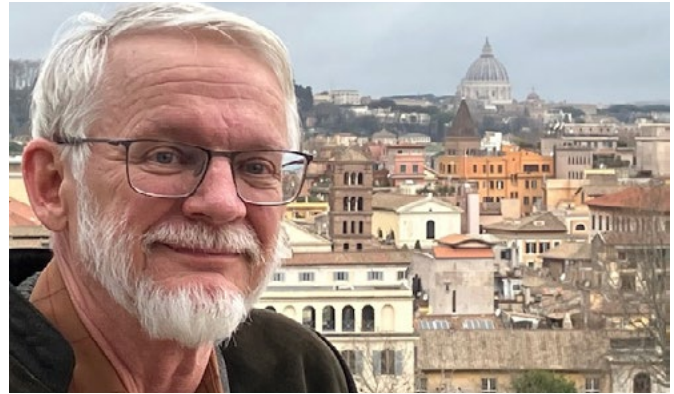


PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. JIM BUSH Dr. Jim Bush visited Pompeii, Italy, after retiring in the spring.

"Dr. Bush was such a committed professional," Johannson said. "He was really able to balance both sides of the house. ... The state Department of Health and Wyoming Medicaid are deeply indebted to Dr. Bush and some of the things that he set up and some of the tracks our agency is continuing and will continue. ... He's got a legacy in the state of Wyoming that is somewhat unmatched in terms of the level of commitment and the results that we saw."

The elderly and other vulnerable adults also concerned Dr. Bush. He knew of many who were exploited and he desired to see that issue addressed, including by the state legislature. He worked with the state's AARP office in bringing the issue to light. He served as a contributor to several reports on neglect and exploitation of elderly and vulnerable adults and made recommendations to the Wyoming legislature to keep this population of citizens safe.

"My heart is in helping the vulnerable of Wyoming and the medical community of Wyoming," Dr. Bush said.

Following in his father's footsteps

Dr. Bush grew up in Texas and received his medical education at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School in Dallas. He spent three years of residency at the University of Texas Health Science Center San Antonio and became certified by the American Board of Internal Medicine in 1983, just before moving to Colorado.

His interest in medicine developed because of his father, whom he called, "the first anesthesiologist in Dallas." During the summer he volunteered at the hospital where his father practiced, watching him work many times.

"He did his own pre-ops," Dr. Bush recalled. "He would see every patient before surgery. The patients loved and respected

him, and, of course, he was doing great work. That was the reason I decided to go into medicine. [But] I fell in love with internal medicine instead of anesthesia.”

Strong Wyoming medical legacy

Dr. Bush’s legacy as Wyoming’s Medicaid medical director remains strong, and he looks upon his time there with fondness.

“In my 16 years as Wyoming’s Medicaid medical director, I’ve had full support of the governor, the head of the department of health, and the Medicaid director ... [and] not once did any clinical decision or judgment I made get questioned,” said Dr. Bush. “I had unbelievable support, and the support I had from everyone in Medicaid was just fantastic.”

“We used to refer to him, half- jokingly but half-seriously, as our ideas man in the department,” said Johannson. “He was always proposing new things to do; we should look at this service differently, we should pay for this service differently, we should stand up this program, that program. He was always trying to have our Medicaid program and our department, as much as we could be, on the cutting edge while also managing the day-to-day, which we have to do efficiently and effectively, but it was all related to that passion and that drive to innovate and to change and do things differently. It’s all about the need to improve outcomes for people’s lives and potentially lower costs and kind of grow the financial position of the state by nature of doing things better.”

“Throughout his career with the Wyoming Department of Health, Dr. Bush led and supported numerous initiatives promoting cost-effective healthcare and improved health outcomes,” said Teri Green, a former colleague at the Wyoming Department of Health. “He participated at the local, city, state, and national level in designing innovative quality measure programs, partnering with medical professionals across the continuum of care. Jim was instrumental in standing up a health management program for all of Wyoming Medicaid

clients, that was recognized nationally by the Disease Management Association of America. He understood the healthcare infrastructure and landscape of Wyoming and worked to create policy appropriate for our state.”

Those successes, and the people with whom he worked, brought delight to Dr. Bush.

“I enjoyed going to work every day,” he said. “We did some amazing things. We sent patients to San Francisco for transplants, we’d send patients to Seattle for orthopedic surgeries—if we couldn’t find anything around, we’d go to the best in the nation. But, I think, in the end run, it saved the state money. We did some studies on that, and we did. I think that was a very important part.”

He also enjoyed his association with other physicians and members of Wyoming Medical Society.

“I enjoyed getting to know them not only as colleagues, but as friends,” Dr. Bush said.

During his career, he served on various hospital committees and state and national medical committees. He served as chairman of Hospice for Larimer County for a few years and as chief of staff at Poudre Valley Hospital, among so many other positions. He was a member of different medical organizations, including the Wyoming Medical Society.

“I believed in giving back to the community,” he said.

Dr. Bush retired earlier this year to pursue activities outside the world of medicine, including traveling and hunting. During the spring, he spent a month touring Europe, including areas of Italy. Although he primarily resides in Colorado, Dr. Bush maintains a home in Cheyenne and frequently returns to Wyoming, especially during bird hunting season when he and his French Brittany dog take to the fields and plains. He’s also hunted big game with his daughter.

Dr. Bush and Kay have two adult children, a son, James, who lives in Cheyenne and is an attorney for Legal Aid of Wyoming, and a daughter, Kathy, who works at a museum in Colorado.

The legacy Dr. Bush leaves upon his retirement continues to impact his former colleagues at the Department of Health.

I just couldn’t speak higher of Dr. Bush,” Johannson said. “It’s just a testament not only to his knowledge and abilities and what he brought to the position, but also to the quality of his character.”


Teri Green said, “Jim’s accomplishments during his time with Wyoming Department of Health have resulted in long-lasting, significant successes for patients, providers, and payors. We are grateful for his contributions.” 



PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. JIM BUSH Dr. Jim Bush enjoys bird hunting with his French Brittany dog.