



Rural Health Challenges

New Summit Elevates Healthcare Policy

Wyoming Medical Society, Wyoming Hospital Association, Wyoming Primary Care Association, and Wyoming Nurses Association invite anyone involved in Wyoming healthcare to attend

BY GAYLE M. IRWIN



Healthcare Policy Summit

8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. | June 12, 2026

UW Conference Center, Laramie | \$50

Registration: www.wyomed.org

The Wyoming Medical Society, Wyoming Hospital Association, Wyoming Primary Care Association, and Wyoming Nurses Association will host the Healthcare Policy Summit this summer, offering an opportunity for those who work in the medical field to ask questions of state legislators and people running for governor and to learn how the various candidates view medical services and challenges in the state.

The Healthcare Policy Summit convenes in Laramie at the UW Conference Center inside the Hilton Garden Inn at 8:00 a.m. on Friday, June 12. The event will bring together Wyoming physicians and healthcare providers, organizations, Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), associations, and facilities with state lawmakers for thoughtful, solutions-focused conversations on health policy issues that shape medical care

across the state.

“It’s time to elevate the conversation statewide around healthcare and the importance of it within the larger economic picture in the state,” said Sheila Bush, executive director of the Wyoming Medical Society. “We can’t recruit new business or sustain businesses we have without a workforce, and that workforce is going to demand access to healthcare.”

Healthcare is “really important” to residents and to people who move to a state for jobs, she added.

Why a summit now?

In 1994, former legislator Tom Stroock published a report about healthcare in Wyoming, Bush said.

“Here we are, still talking about many of the same recommendations,” she said. “Governor Gordon’s Healthcare Task Force put out some of the same recommendations, with some of the same reasoning, as was published in a report in 1994. I think all of us should take a minute to pause and ask ourselves why, 30 years later, we’re having the same conversations, and we’re giving the legislature the same recommendations.”

With 2026 being an election year for the governorship, secretary of state, and many in the legislature, this seemed to

be an appropriate time to convene a healthcare policy summit, said Eric Boley, president of the Wyoming Hospital Association and the Wyoming Long Term Care Association.

“There’ll be a lot of changes (in leadership this year),” he said. “This will be a good opportunity for the healthcare

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industry to have folks in front of us and be able to understand their perspective and be educated when we go to vote.”

He hopes to see a variety of people connected to the medical field attend the summit, including physicians, nurses, hospital board trustees, hospital CEOs, and administrators of long-term care facilities. The public is also welcome.

“We want this to be interactive,” Boley said. “We hope to be able to ask pointed questions about what their understanding of healthcare is, what their thoughts are and what their vision is for healthcare in the state.”

The four organizations leading the summit, Wyoming Medical Society, Wyoming Hospital Association, Wyoming Primary Care Association, and Wyoming Nurses Association, have “worked together for years” regarding advocacy and policy relating to healthcare, including emergency services and obstetrics (OB), Boley said.

“Because of those common threads and the work that we’ve done together, it just organically came together with this group of folks who already have such a strong working relationship,” he said.

Topics for the summit include workforce, education, economics of healthcare, healthcare infrastructure, a gubernatorial forum with the candidates for Wyoming governor, and a legislative panel on the status of healthcare in the state and the top priorities of issues Wyoming faces regarding healthcare in the state.

Healthcare challenges in Wyoming

There are several challenges in Wyoming’s healthcare environment, such as access and distance, lack of physicians, nurses, and other medical workers (especially in some specific practices), and cost, both to those in the medical field and to patients. Additionally, frustration with the system from practitioners and their patients have been expressed, Bush said.

“Sometimes patients aren’t able to see the same doctor (and then) are given limited time to talk about one concern when they have more than one concern, and they leave feeling dissatisfied,” she said. “That’s not how physicians want to deliver care either. Our physicians are just as unhappy.”

Medical provider burnout and shortages are results of the broken system, she added. Such things will likely be talked about at the summit.

“We can’t talk about the policy meter without really identifying the problem we’re trying to solve,” Bush said.

There is also the matter of data, she said.

“Wyoming is not shining (in this area),” Bush said. “Our weakness right now is not having one reliable, universally-trusted source for data, and, for me, all of these conversations ... need really accurate data.”

She provided an example.

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years. I can't tell you with full certainty and confidence how many physicians actually practice full-time in the state of Wyoming. That is information that we should know," she said.

Although the Board of Medicine possesses licensure data, "even if you live in a completely different state, you can check the box for Wyoming and apply for a license" with the state. Although these physicians may practice telehealth, which many did during COVID, these same physicians may no longer see patients and they don't have offices in the state, she explained.

There is a lack of providers in the state, said Kara Beech, executive director of the Wyoming Nursing Association. Although some larger communities, such as Cheyenne and Casper, may have more of an abundance, the more rural areas lack physicians and other medical workers. Even if some hold licenses, they don't see patients regularly.

Lack of actual practicing physicians, especially in the more rural areas of Wyoming, impacts patient care, whether a person is younger or older. And Wyoming has an aging population.

"We are a state with one of the largest older populations," Beech said. "With that brings individuals who are much sicker and who have chronic diseases."

"Maybe we come away with a spark of creativity, something innovative, that can say, 'Okay, this can be how we ensure that we're building the workforce, that we're able to retain providers, keep the people that we're training in the state,'"

Lack of healthcare workers impacts others as well. Currently, maternal and behavioral health, including substance abuse, are "some of the hot button topics" regarding the medical field in the state, said Jen Davis, executive director of the Wyoming Primary Care Association. Funding from the Rural Health Transformation Project may help address some of these issues and challenges, such as chronic diseases. Now is exactly the right time to have these conversations. With the state recently

receiving authorization for our revised budget and plan, we can get into the details of what our next steps will look like for coming together and taking action, she said.

Strategic assistance from the federal government

Last year, U.S. President Donald J. Trump signed the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA), passed by Congress, into law. Part of that law created the Rural Health Transformation Program, which offers Wyoming the opportunity to strengthen healthcare through sustainable, innovative, and transformative solutions. The Wyoming Department of Health (WDH), in coordination with the governor's office, applied for funding to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services in November 2025, and an award of more than \$200 million was given the following month.

With these funds, WDH plans to improve healthcare in the state through various means, including telehealth technology, workforce development and training, and focusing on chronic disease prevention, behavioral health, and maternal and child care, among other strategies.

As outlined in the application, the department believes Wyoming's "biggest challenge lies in access to basic medical care" for its residents and visitors. In particular, the application noted four areas:

1. Availability of ground ambulance services to respond to 911 calls;
2. Viability of small, rural hospitals capable of the basics: e.g., "stabilize and ship" to higher levels of care in case of emergency;
3. Access to labor and delivery services so mothers can have babies safely;
4. Low and variable access to primary care and behavioral health providers.

Hospitals in the state are closing their OB services, said Beech. Last year, the hospital in Wheatland joined four others in the state that closed or paused their inpatient labor and delivery services.

"That's concerning," she said.

According to an article from Wyoming Public Media, the Wheatland closure increased the number of counties in the state without labor and delivery capacity to nine, adding to the lack of specialty medical care in Wyoming.

However, the state provides a strong alternative to fewer primary care physicians.

"We are very lucky in that advanced nurse practitioners have full practice authority in Wyoming," Beech said. "That's an

amazing benefit. We have some communities in which their only healthcare provider is an APRN [a nurse practitioner], and they provide great care.”

Hopes for the Summit and beyond

The closure of labor and delivery services, the lack of OB and other specialty physicians, distance to hospitals, and other healthcare concerns in the state, including education, training, and workplace safety, make the upcoming summit crucial, Beech said.

“I think it’s a pivotal time for us to come together,” Beech said. “We all represent a large member base, and it will be great to bring our members together with legislators.”

“Right now is the perfect time to hopefully get all the players at the table in one room at one time to really have hard discussions but open and honest discussions about: what does healthcare look like now, what could it look like, and how can we move forward in a positive way in Wyoming,” she said.

She hopes people come to the summit with “an open mind and the willingness to talk and to have hard conversations.” She also hopes to find “leaders and champions ... to move the needle” regarding healthcare and the issues and challenges providers and patients experience in the state.

“Maybe we come away with a spark of creativity, something innovative, that can say, ‘Okay, this can be how we ensure that we’re building the workforce, that we’re able to retain providers, keep the people that we’re training in the state,’” Beech said. “Hopefully, we can figure that out.”

The summit presents a unique opportunity to discuss healthcare in Wyoming with policymakers and potential state leaders, and therefore, people are encouraged to attend the event.


“I think this is a super-important election cycle,” Boley said. “There are a lot of important decisions that need to be made by voters. We feel like all of us in the state need to be more actively involved in becoming educated and then casting our vote, and

so from the healthcare perspective, we’re trying to get people fired up and interested.”

“I think it’s a pivotal time for us to come together,” Beech said. “We all represent a large member base, and it will be great to bring our members together with legislators.” She also would like to see this, or a similar event, be held annually, though she admits, that can be a challenge.

“We get so busy within our own organizations, and sometimes we don’t reach out. Sheila has brought us together, and we’ve done such a great job of reaching out for this meeting, and I hope that continues,” Beech said. “I think we can do so much for healthcare in the state overall as a group.”

“We have a lot of good potential in Wyoming to do a lot of good work, but we need to do that collectively,” Davis said. “We are so spread out. I think that this will be the first year of something great that we can really leverage to get better collaboration in Wyoming on healthcare.”

To register for the Healthcare Policy Summit, scheduled from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on June 12, visit any of the association websites as well as the Wyoming Medical Society web page www.wyomed.org, or contact WMS at 307-635-2424. 

These organizations are spearheading the Healthcare Policy Summit:

The Wyoming Hospital Association is a private, nonprofit, member-owned organization that represents hospitals across the state.

The Wyoming Medical Society, founded in 1903, is a member-driven organization that provides representation, advocacy, and services to Wyoming physicians and PAs.

The Wyoming Nurses Association is the professional organization for registered nurses in Wyoming with a mission to lead the profession of nursing and healthcare in Wyoming.

The Wyoming Primary Care Association supports Community Health Centers in providing quality healthcare, which in turn supports Wyoming’s communities. The centers are located in Cheyenne, Rock Springs, Evanston, Powell, Lovell, Greybull, Sheridan, Cody, Casper, Riverton, Dubois, Lander, and Laramie.